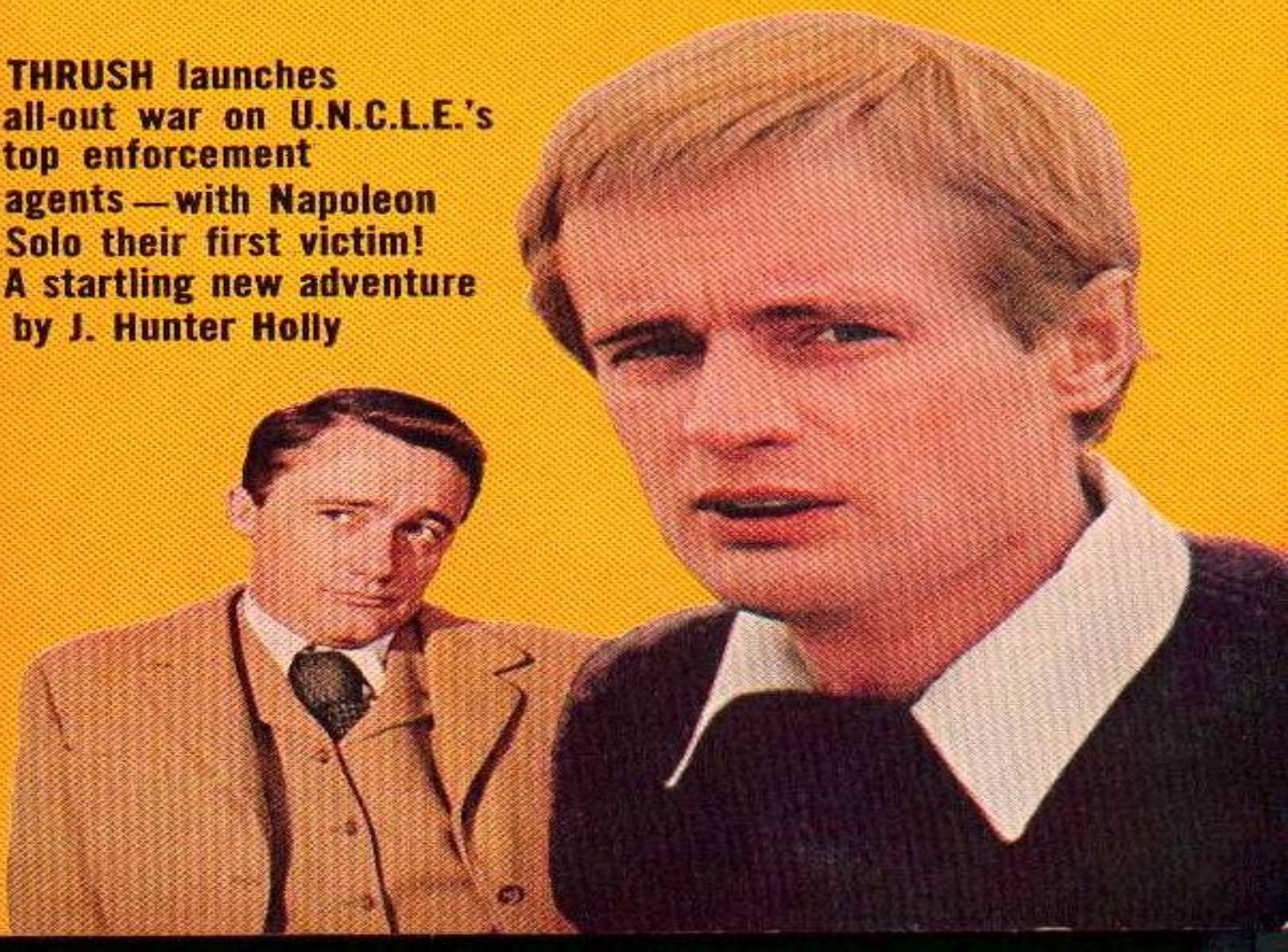
ACE BOOKS/G-636/50c

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

NUMBER 10

The Assassination Affair

THRUSH launches all-out war on U.N.C.L.E.'s top enforcement agents—with Napoleon Solo their first victim! A startling new adventure by J. Hunter Holly



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THE ASSASSINATION AFFAIR

NAPOLEON SOLO came down the dilapidated stairway slowly, hearing the tired pad of Illya Kuryakin's feet following behind him. He glanced at his watch. Four-thirty. Four-thirty, and they still weren't finished with this dismal legwork. His feet were finished. Hot and aching, they screamed for a rest, and his calves and thighs cried for an end to stair climbing. But Alexander Waverly had handed out the lists of businesses to investigate, and that was that.

Solo stopped at the foot of the stairs and leaned against the drab, plastered wall, as Illya negotiated the last few steps. Solo was a young man, of average height, his highly trim and fit body exuding a vitality that verged on magnetism. His eyes challenged the candid handsomeness of his face by looking at the world with the gleam of a rogue. "Playboy," strangers might peg him, or "Jet-set bachelor," unaware that his carefully tailored suitcoat concealed a deadly pistol, that his body was fit not because of tennis but from unarmed combat practice, and that his smile didn't always mean what it said. In reality, Napoleon Solo was no casual man-about-town, but Chief Enforcement Agent of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement

Illya Kuryakin was an inverted image of Solo. Blond and blue-eyed, with his yellow hair cut in a "non-cut," he gazed at the world somberly, absorbing the humor of what he saw without acknowledgment, keeping his intellect and personality introverted to the point where it hit subliminally. He was small, but immensely strong; Slavic and stoic; and his associates guessed he played the brooding gypsy purposefully to throw them off the track of his true emotions.

"Heads up," Illya said. "Every one down stays down. We don't have to retrace any steps."

"I must be out of condition," Solo sighed, knowing it wasn't true, but wanting to gripe. "Three days of walking the cement of this town - I still say it's a waste!"

Illya's blue eyes agreed, but he didn't voice it. "You must allow Mr. Waverly his flights of humor. If he wants us to pound the pavement searching for someone who has seen a mysterious man, then we pound the pavement."

"Rule number one - Waverly is boss. Right."

“But you think it’s beneath your dignity,” Illya prodded.

“I can tell you, it’s beneath the dignity of my feet.” Solo pushed away from the wall. “Well - What have we accomplished today?”

Illya reached inside his black jacket and pulled out the notebook that contained the list. A quick count, and he recited, “We’ve investigated twenty places. All with no result. We have eight left to go.”

“And the next one? By foot? Or, hopefully, taxi?”

“Foot. It’s only five blocks.”

“Okay.” Solo straightened his coat, resigned to the five block walk, another narrow flight of stairs, another confused office girl, and another blank. “Maybe by tomorrow something big will have popped up so we can get out of the gum-shoe business and back into the action.” He glanced around the small landing, decided it was deserted enough, and reached for his pen communicator. “Before we ruin our dispositions anymore, I’ll check with Headquarters to see if it’s necessary.”

Illya smiled a tiny smile and took his turn relaxing against the wall as Solo spoke into the transceiver. “Open Channel D, please.”

A girl’s voice answered his sibilantly, “Channel D is open, Mr. Solo.”

“Thanks for recognizing me, dear. Now - and you’d better say yes - has anyone had any luck? We haven’t.”

“It’s the same all around,” the girl answered. “Nothing has turned up. We’re beginning to think this Mr. Dundee you’re trying to track is really a ghost and doesn’t exist except in someone’s addled mind.”

“Don’t knock it,” Solo told her. “At least ghost chasing offers some exciting possibilities.”

Her voice came back intimately. “You poor thing. Do your feet hurt?”

Solo smiled at her tone, envisioning her, a lovely among lovelies, and definitely alone in the Communications Room. Otherwise she wouldn’t have dared make small talk over the channel. “Do you know a good remedy for aches and pains?”

“Just try me, Napoleon. I’m the girl with all the remedies. But if you want in on them, first rule is that it must be evening, with a big moon, and -” Her voice broke off, he heard her cough selfconsciously, and when she came back her tone was businesslike. “Your orders, Mr. Solo, are to complete your list and come back here to compare notes.”

“Right. But it’s a long list.”

“Then get busy, Mr. Solo.”

The communicator closed off and Solo put it in his pocket. Illya stepped away from the wall where he had been listening to the conversation with his usual imperturbable stare. “You’re going to get one of those girls a reprimand some day, Napoleon.”

“Mr. Waverly won’t be hard on them. He’ll know whose fault it is. Now - lead the way, friend. The ghost of Mr. Dundee awaits us.” As they started out of the building he added, “I had a date to go dancing tonight, but I think I’ll arrange to sit the evening out.”

They emerged from the dark hall into a bright day. Little traffic moved and the sun shone dully, reflecting in streaks on the storefronts. The building they came from housed a men’s clothing store on the ground floor, but there were few pedestrians to window-shop. Solo stopped to do just that, his practiced eye scanning the falls of ties and oddments on display. Illya went on a few yards before he stopped to wait impatiently.

The comparative quiet of the little-used street was shattered by the howl of rubber tires taking the corner with a burn of blue smoke, and the roar of a powerful engine. Solo spun around to see a great black Cadillac, old model, struggling to steady itself on four wheels as it thundered down the pavement. It was upon him before he had time to refocus his eyes, the tires yelping as the brakes were crushed by some heavy foot. But he saw the back window. It was open, and sticking from it in a deadly threat was the snout of a machine gun. There were eyes glinting behind the gun, but Solo had no time to identify them as the gun leaped into orange fire and sprayed death at him.

Solo dimly heard the cries and running steps of the pedestrians as he fell to one knee, yanking out his U.N.C.L.E. Special to return the fire. Glass split and jangled to the sidewalk from the display window behind him, but he ignored the impact of it, trying to hold steady for a decent shot. A tire. A gas tank.

The Cadillac sped ahead full tilt, careening, and his one reflexive round missed. The car swept by the place where Illya stood startled, and its brakes breathed blue smoke again, its gears ground into reverse, and it catapulted itself up the street on a suicidal backwards course. It passed Illya by, coming on for Solo.

Solo sprang up and hurled himself into the shelter of the doorway, drawing a bead to meet the car as it came across his sights. It came too fast, the machine gun spraying lead, and he had no time for return fire. He

counted a fast three and ran onto the sidewalk, but the car was backtracking across the corner intersection. It howled as it shifted gears, made a roaring U-turn, and sped away.

Solo stood on the sidewalk, frustrated. It had been too fast. And too close. The aches had been driven from his body by adrenalin, but the adrenalin just sat in his blood, making his hands shake. He holstered his gun and brushed the glass fragments off his suit and out of his hair with short, angry motions. Then Illya was beside him, gun in hand, helping to pick the glass shards off his hack.

“Welcome to sitting-ducksville,” Solo spat. “Any license number?”

“The numbers were blacked out,” Illya said.

“It figures. Anyway, that guy was the poorest shot I’ve ever seen. How could he have missed?”

“Be happy he did.”

“But what do you suppose it was all about?” Solo faced Illya, his eyes still snapping black.

“Attempted murder!” Illya said simply.

“Gangster style? We’re not after gangsters, Illya, so they shouldn’t be after us.”

“Then perhaps it was Dundee’s ghost. Don’t argue with Fate. At least you’re whole.”

The few pedestrians who had screamed and run had now gathered up their courage to stand in a semicircle about twenty feet away from the two agents. They hung there, curious, their bodies anxious, but their feet braced, ready to flee again if these two men repeated their performance.

“There must have been more to this last place we investigated than we thought.” Solo peered up to the third floor of the building where the list had led them.

“We’ll take that possibility up with Mr. Waverly. Right now, we’re creating a scene.” Illya pulled Solo’s attention to the crowd of onlookers. “Let’s move on be fore the police come. We don’t have time to answer questions, and these people are nervous.”

Solo grinned, noticing Illya’s one faux pas. “It might be tranquilizing to them if you’d put your gun away.”

Illya holstered his gun, a slight echo of Solo’s grin pulling at his lips that so seldom smiled at anything.

Solo headed straight for the crowd and pushed his way through, calling briskly to the people, “Excuse me, folks. Your neighborhood’s just too noisy for a peace loving man like me.”

The crowd parted at the banter and the two agents walked down the street, feeling stares on their backs like hard pinpoints. They turned the first corner and hailed a taxi. As they climbed inside and rested their tired bodies against the cushions, Solo asked, “One thing, Illya. How is it that you weren’t any part of the target? They had clear shots at you, but they passed you over as though you were bulletproof.”

“One never can guess about such things, Napoleon. It’s better not to try.”

–

The two agents went into U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters through Del Floria’s Tailor Shop with only a wave for the oldish man who pressed the proper buttons to give them access to the vast honeycomb of the Command. The girl at the reception desk who pinned their badges on today was Illya s particular subject for teasing, so Solo didn’t glance at her a second time. She went all out for the somber Russian, her eyelashes fluttering, and a flirtatious smile on her pretty face as she pulled her shoulders back, but Illya only murmured to her, “Careful, Lynn - you’ll pop your buttons,” and led the way to the automatic doors that took them into their second home.

Second home, Solo thought, as he walked side by side with this wiry man who was more of a friend than be liked to admit. Solo’s life was completely segmented, split down the middle. One part was steel corridors and dark alleys, guns, bullets, and desperation. The other half was soft lights and softer music, good liquor, and heady women. But even the pleasant side always carried an overtone. Always there was a gun nestled under his arm; always there was a communicator in his pocket that could launch him out of warm, soft arms back into the alleys. As Chief Enforcement Agent for U.N.C.L.E., he was definitely agent first and man second. He relished it that way.

They stepped into the elevator that would whisk them to Mr. Alexander Waverly, the man who bore the weight of making policy for U.N.C.L.E. and, thus, for the world; the man who never gave praise, who put up with a carefully balanced amount of horseplay from his agents for the sake of morale, but who really would have preferred a carefully groomed line of

robots to take and obey his commands. Indestructible robots, of course, that couldn't tire, fail, or die.

They went directly to his office, knowing Waverly expected them. He had eyes throughout the building. He was waiting in his place by the big revolving table. Solo and Illya sat down as his gaze swept across them, assessing, bright, and cool.

"Well, gentlemen," Waverly said, "since I know you have nothing to report on the Dundee affair, why have you come shoulder to shoulder to see me?"

"You know we have nothing to report, sir?" Solo asked. "Quite. Archer was the one to find the treasure trove this time. He reported in ten minutes ago. He found the chemical supply office that has done business with Dundee and his mystifying chemicals. We can go on from there."

"We have no idea of what Dundee is doing, as I understand it," Illya put in.

"Precisely, Mr. Kuryakin. Hopefully, we'll discover it - and soon."

Solo remembered the flurry that had set the legwork in motion. An agent named Randolph had gasped out a final report from a shabby hotel in Chicago, groaning a bare, few words: "Dundee - chemical - plant - check chemical supply - New York. Thrush." And Randolph had died on that word, as too many U.N.C.L.E. agents had died on it.

Waverly had immediately thrown the organization into action and the computers had divested the fact that Dundee was a medium-high Thrush official, generally a supplier. Following the dead agent's last request, the legwork had begun, trudging from one chemical supply house to another, armed with a picture of Dundee, hoping to find where he had done his business and what he had purchased. Now that part of the affair was complete. They had found the place and the product.

"What was the chemical, sir?" Solo asked.

"Blasted if I know, Mr. Solo. Our chemists are working on it. Oh, we have the name, but no idea how it might be used. The entire message from Randolph is a puzzle. It has so many possible resolutions."

Illya jumped in on that cue, eager to explore the resolutions. "I've been trying to decipher it, as a matter of fact, sir. And just that one phrase, 'Chemical - plant,' could mean three different things."

Solo grinned at Illya's eagerness. "Now we'll get a list of the three."

Illya ignored his friend's thrust. "First, he could have meant an actual chemical plant - a factory or lab. Second, he could have meant a plant in the form of a drop, a cache. Or, he might have simply meant flora - a real, living, growing plant. And the chemical would have something to do with plants, then."

"Well reasoned." Mr. Waverly nodded. "We're assuming our chemists will give us the answer when they discover what use the chemical could possibly be. I don't like this business, I can tell you. When an agent is killed it can only mean something big." He dismissed their rising curiosity quickly. "But it doesn't concern you two anymore. Unless it evolves into something, you have no further need to study it."

"At least the legwork is finished," Solo sighed.

"Too much for you, Mr. Solo?" Waverly looked at him, the ice in his eyes melting into a twinkle.

"Frankly, sir - yes."

Illya said, "Not even meeting a long line of office girls could alleviate it for Napoleon, sir. So you can see how hard it was on him

Solo cast Illya a quick glance. "The machine gun fire alleviated it nicely."

"I don't make the connection between office girls and machine guns, Mr. Solo." Waverly sat forward. "Explain, please."

Solo recited exactly what had happened without attempting to excuse his or Illya's ineptitude. "We fouled it up completely, sir," he concluded. "There was no reason why we couldn't have stopped that car, but neither of us managed. I got off exactly one shot, and that missed."

"Perhaps the element of surprise, Mr. Solo." Waverly was frowning in thought, envisioning the scene Solo had described. "They didn't try for Mr. Kuryakin, you say?"

"Not one bullet came my way," Illya admitted.

"Odd. And what conclusions have you drawn from it?"

"None," Solo said. "An attack like that seems too crude for Thrush. Out in the open - daylight - we should have been able to bring them down easily. Thrush wouldn't be so careless."

"Personal enemies, Mr. Solo?" Waverly's stare rested on Solo curiously.

Solo's face broke into the grin Waverly expected. "Hardly. I haven't dated any gangsters' molls lately."

“Whatever initiated it, it’s most interesting. I would suggest that you be particularly careful for a time.” He cleared his throat, symbolic of clearing the decks. “For the moment, you two can return to your desk work. I may want you in a day or two, but I’m sending someone else to investigate Randolph’s death in Chicago.”

Solo stood up, glad for the respite. All he could see now was a hot bath, a change of clothes - especially socks - and the best method to use to talk Rachel out of the dancing date and into a quiet dinner at home.

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Chapter l

“There is a Coffin Waiting for You”

THE ROOM was lit softly with one lamp, muting the bright, masculine colors and easing the lines of the contemporary furnishings into a pure bachelor’s den. Napoleon Solo sat on the big, soft sofa in a dreamy state. He approved of the room. Over the years, he had carefully collected everything that was in it with an eye to its elegance, comfort, and effect. Women liked it because it definitely bespoke a man and held a hint of sensuality that warned them to run for cover or stay at their own risk.

Two doors opened from the room - leading to the bedroom and kitchen - and at the back were French doors giving out onto a little terrace, well above the traffic lanes below, separated from the neighbors’ terraces by low stone walls and planters filled with evergreens. Solo changed addresses often, for security reasons, and of all his apartments this was the first one with a terrace. He’d had to argue with Mr. Waverly to get it.

The coffee table in front of the sofa was laden with the remains of a simple dinner for two, and nestled beside it was a champagne cooler. Solo leaned against the cushions, glass in hand, his senses bound in the Bossa Nova that came from his stereo, and even more bound in the fragrance and form of the woman who cuddled beside him.

Rachel was tall, but never coltish. She followed his preference right down the line - full figured, heavy lashed and languid eyed. She was a redhead with hair that caught the light and reflected gold.

Solo lifted his feet onto the coffee table and wiggled his toes contentedly. He had his shoes off, letting his feet recover from the afternoon of walking.

Rachel stirred beside him, and then she had to say it. He had been waiting for it all through dinner and was glad she finally did.

“I’m not protesting a single thing about the evening, mind you, Napoleon. It was nice.”

“And will be nicer,” he said.

“But, is it really the latest thing to entertain a lady in your stocking feet?”

“Rachel, tonight it is, believe me. I’m sorry about the dancing I promised you, but -”

“Your feet hurt,” she finished the sentence for him. She sat forward. “Would you rather I left so you can soak them?”

“That’s not what I had in mind at all,” Solo protested, his eyes playing over her.

She rose from the sofa and walked a few steps away. “Well, I’m not going to massage them for you, Napoleon.”

“It might not be a bad idea - but, no.” Solo leaned forward, grunting, and slipped his shoes on. She was going to build this thing into a pique if he didn’t halt it now, and it would spoil the entire plan of the evening. He stood up, flexing his stiff body, and went to her. He touched her shoulders gently and turned her to face him. “You look nothing like a masseuse,” he murmured. “You don’t have the muscles.”

She smiled up at him and slipped into his arms. “At least there’s nothing wrong with your after-dinner charm. I thought you were going to fall asleep and leave me to my own devices.”

Her mouth was waiting, expecting a kiss, and he followed through with a little one. She giggled gratifyingly, and he circled her with a strong arm and led her back toward the sofa. “This was a catered, sit-down dinner, love, so let’s get on with it and not break the mood. Your redheaded temper is too much for a man to handle.”

“And you’re too much for anybody.” She came along willingly.

A slight breeze stirred the curtains that were pulled back from the open terrace doors, and then they stirred again, moved by something that wasn’t a breeze. A muffled *ker-plow* broke into the Bossa Nova and a whine passed Solo’s head by a margin of inches.

Bullet! He grabbed Rachel and pushed her down between the sofa and the coffee table, spilling the contents off the table as he made room for his own body, which he used as a shield to protect her from anything else that might come flying through the air. He held onto her hard so she would keep still and sense the danger. She trembled under his hands, but made no sound.

His right hand knifed inside his coat, slapping for his gun, and came up empty. A quick vision of the gun resting in his bureau drawer flashed to

mind as he cursed under his breath. But he had tucked the gun away for good reason. Rachel. It was never wise to prod a girl with a lump of steel when you were trying for an intimate evening.

He strained to hear, wishing the damned record would come to its end and give him a chance. Was that a footstep? He couldn't remain a sitting target any longer, so he pushed down on Rachel hard to tell her to stay safe, patted her, and raised his head to peer around the edge of the sofa.

He and Rachel weren't alone anymore. There were two men in the room, standing near the terrace doors, swiveling to find targets for the guns they held in their hands. One man was tall, thin, with a tight mouth and twitching eyelids. *Nervous type*, Solo mentally catalogued him. The other was of medium height and strongly built. *Fighter*, Solo thought.

They came into the room looking stupidly about for something to shoot. Solo tightened his leg muscles, crouched for leverage, and hurled himself up and over the sofa in one leap, hitting into them both at once since they were foolish enough to stay close together. The impact of his weight made the smaller man lose his gun, and as it thumped to the carpet, the tall man streaked for the open door.

The man went down under him and Solo took the first measure of his body. It was hard and steely, with no flab. The man's hand slithered for the fallen gun and Solo dropped harder on top of him, then pushed against his chest for leverage to stand. But his assailant grasped his right arm, made a churning maneuver and hammer-locked his right leg, struggling as though to pick Solo bodily from the floor and fling him over his shoulder.

Solo thrashed, grappling for an edge. With his left hand, he smashed into the other man's face, pushing his bead back in a harsh, painful thrust that cracked his skull against the carpet. His right leg was free and he pulled it under him, getting to his knees, but the man was unhurt, protected by the carpet, and he, too, raised himself, gasping.

Solo tried a left-handed chop to the throat, but the desperation in his opponent made his reflexes quick and he fended it off as a yell burst out of him. "Help me, Louie! Help me!"

Solo wrenched free and got to his feet, the other man rolling away from him and coming up straight. They crouched, facing each other. Footfalls behind Solo told him the tall Louie had taken courage and come back. He swiveled to meet them both, but the move was too late. Louie's long body was full force on his back, taking him to his knees. Solo raised his hands,

grabbed hair and suitcoat and flung Louie out onto the carpet, but now the shorter man was on him, and before he could rise, the two of them were pummeling him with blows designed to hammer him into the floorboards. A shoe slashed in and the heel struck him in the temple, making the dim light black out. He lurched forward, hearing a frantic call through the momentary grogginess. “Come on, Robard, get out! Now!”

A hand whizzed into Solo’s view, grabbing the fallen gun, but no fire came from it. All that was left of the fight was the thud of two pairs of feet running for the terrace.

Solo shook his head, ignoring the pain from his temple and the twinkling dots of light before his eyes, staggered to his feet, and followed. He sagged against the terrace doors and peered warily down the expanse of stone, dotted by the low walls that divided the apartments. His two assassins were setting records in the sprint and low-hurdles as they made for the end of the building and the fire escape. There was no point in giving chase. His gun was still in the bedroom.

Hands touched his shoulders timidly, then clutched at him, and he swung around reflexively, tensed to throw off this new assailant. But it was Rachel. Her face was pale, makeup standing in blotches about her eyes, lip stick like a stab of pinkish blood on her lips. She panted, but said nothing.

The silenced *ker-plow* of another shot flared orange from the end of the terrace and lead whined in to splinter the wood near Solo’s head. He pulled himself back. Rachel cried out and ran for the sofa. Venturing a quick look, Solo saw the smaller man, Robard, halted at the fire escape, taking a last few potshots, afraid of pursuit. Two more rounds whizzed by and Robard was gone.

Solo rotated his shoulders, trying to settle his hammered bones into their proper places so they would hold up his frame. Rachel’s red hair peeped up over the front of the sofa, followed by her terrified eyes. When she saw his relaxed posture, she stood up, but had to clutch at the sofa to keep her trembling body from falling.

“I’ll get you a cab right away,” he said, hoping to calm her.

“What was that?” she wailed. “What was that all about?”

“Whatever it was, I want to get you out of here.”

She stiffened, some weird determination taking hold of her and stilling her shakes. “No! Don’t even come near me.”

He stopped where he was. He had been ready to reach for her, to comfort her, but she backed off from him.

“I’ll get my own cab,” she said accusingly. “I’d rather. I don’t like any of this, Napoleon. I’ll go down alone. Those men weren’t burglars. They were after you! I should have known anyone with a name like Solo would turn out to be a gangster.” She became a flurry of movement rushing about the room, gathering her wrap and gloves and purse. Her feet hit the carpet in anger and fright. “I’ll go down alone.”

He let her have her way. “I understand. You want to keep your distance from me. All right. I can’t blame you.” As she made quickly for the hail door, he added, “I’ll watch you leave from up here. But there’s nothing to worry about, Rachel. You’re perfectly safe. I promise.

“Promise!” She laughed a harsh, nasty laugh. “Have fun with your playmates, but don’t you dare ever call me again! The door slammed shut behind her and the room was quiet except for the click of the stereo shutting itself off.

Solo hurried into the bedroom, almost pulled the drawer out of the bureau frame, and grabbed his gun. He headed back to the terrace, tearing his coat off on the way and strapping on his shoulder holster. The gun he kept hard and handy in his grasp. He edged onto the terrace and looked both ways, but it was deserted. There weren’t even any lights showing from the other apartments. He smiled. He hadn’t expected any. It would be a good hour before anyone took the chance of looking out for the source of the disturbance.

He strode to the balcony rail and glanced down into the street, feeling guilty as he saw Rachel run from the entrance and dash for a taxi that waited for her. He should have gone with her. Yet from this vantage point he could protect her if she needed protection. The street was quite empty and, as the cab pulled away, he breathed easier. Rachel was safe at least. And hopping mad.

He went inside, closed and locked the terrace doors, pulled the curtains, and drew his coat on over the holster and gun. The room was a shambles. The tipped coffee table had spilled the remains of dinner and cascades of champagne onto the rug, there was an overturned lamp, and things on one side of the room were just enough out of place to give the place a disheveled look. His cleaning woman would be hopping mad, too. He sat

down, pulling out his communicator. Calling Headquarters was next in line. He wondered just how he would explain all this to Mr. Waverly.

Before he could thumb the signal button, a sharp knock sounded on his door. He was on his feet, gun drawn, before the knock ended. Stepping quietly, he approached the door from the right and reached across to turn the knob. As the door swung in, he raised the gun, holding it out of sight, but leveled.

He straightened as he saw the figure in the hall. There was nothing menacing in her. She was a young girl - maybe twenty-one, maybe not - with free-swinging blond hair and enormous blue eyes that were designed for showing surprise. She wore a red, white, and blue Mod style dress, clipped off well above the knees, and her hands were nervously twining and untwining about each other.

Solo took her in with one glance, decided she looked innocent, but also decided not to trust anything today. He kept firm hold on his gun.

“Oh - Mr. Solo,” she said, her voice soft and high. “Are you all right?” Her blue eyes darted over him. “I thought you were hurt. I saw that woman leave in a hurry, and then you didn’t make a sound, and -”

Solo interrupted her torrent of worry with a short, curious, “You were listening?”

“Of course! When you didn’t make a sound I got frightened.”

Solo gripped the gun tighter, keeping it out of her line of vision. “Why were you -”

She cut him off. “I didn’t know whether to come, myself, or call the police. After all, I’m not used to this sort of thing, and -”

“Look,” he interrupted. “Do you ever run down?”

She took a deep breath and smiled. “Not very often, I guess.”

It was a relief just to have a pause in her nervous tirade. “You do have a name?” Solo asked.

“Elaine Michaels. But you can call me Lainy.” With no warning, her hand was on the door and she pushed herself into the room, squeezing persistently to get by. “I was so worried. I heard those noises that had to be guns with silencers, and -”

“Just what do you know about silencers?” Solo’s neck tingled with suspicion. He kept to the door, easing his gun into his pocket, but keeping a hand on it. The girl seemed unarmed, but today - tonight - there was no telling.

“Only what I’ve seen in the movies,” she answered. “But I knew the sound when I heard it on the terrace. I saw those two men run away, and you were out there.” She faced him, her hands making odd little movements, reaching for him, wanting to touch him, yet holding back from contact. At last her right hand managed to pat him. “Those men went right by my terrace doors!”

“Low gear, please.” Solo closed the hail door, deciding to play this her way since there seemed to be no other. “I have some questions.”

“Oh, really, Mr. Solo - I’m just telling you.”

He took hold of her shoulders to slow her down to something more nearly human and logical. “Now” - he made his voice stern - “you’re Lainy Michaels. All right. So far. Do you live in this building?” He had mentally gone down the list of tenants, something he normally had to do for security reasons, and he could recall no Lainy Michaels.

“Yes and no,” she said. “Two apartments down.”

“Yes and no?”

‘Well, I’ve been living here for a whole month, but I don’t actually live here, if you see what I mean. I came to visit a friend, Betty Carter, and she was called away and I’ve been alone for two whole weeks.”

Betty Carter. Solo checked his memory of the tenants again. That name was real. But it was printed all over the mailboxes so it would have been simple for this girl to pick it out and use it as a cover. But a cover for what?

He had no time to guess because she started on again, picking up speed. “When I got up enough nerve, I just had to come and see if you were safe.”

Solo sighed and let go of her shoulders. “As you see, I’m fine,” he said impatiently, holding out his arms to prove that he was all in one piece.

“No, you aren’t. There’s blood on your temple.”

Solo’s hand streaked up and felt the stickiness of his own blood. It wasn’t much. Not even enough to really concern this strange girl. “Forget that. It’s nothing a washcloth won’t fix.”

“Have you called the police?” She walked about, examining the room, the mess of the floor, clucking her tongue as she went.

“Everything is taken care of, Lainy. Except one loose end. You.”

“For heaven’s sake, why me?”

“That what I’m asking. Now stand still and tell me how you happen to know me!”

A blush spread up from her neck to cover her cheeks with pink. “I suppose I have to admit it. I’ve been watching you, your comings and goings. I must say, you do more going than coming.”

Solo cocked his head, the usual twinkle of his eyes replaced by doubt at her answer.

“Well, after all,” she hurried to explain, “I live alone and I haven’t any friends here - only my cat - and you’re such an attractive man. I’ve been at it for two weeks. You never saw me.”

“I must be off my form not to notice I was being watched” - he smiled at her - “and by a girl who looks the way you look.”

“I thought maybe one day I could catch your attention, fall down or something so you’d have to notice me, and then we’d be off to a good start.” She obviously took his grin to mean he trusted her, for she came close and whispered, “Have you called the police? You have to report burglars, you know. It’s your duty.”

“And your duty is to stay out of things like this, Lainy.”

“Not at all.” She was certain.

He had expected that. Girls with big blue eyes and innocent faces, girls this young, were always certain of everything. He was quite sure, himself, that she was nothing more than she pretended to be, but he had to find a way to ease her out. He said menacingly, “How do you know I’m not a gangster and what you saw wasn’t an underworld vendetta of some kind?”

She laughed. “You? Mr. Solo, you’re no gangster. You don’t have the eyes for it. Even I know that much. You do have a gun, though. I saw you put it in your pocket.”

Solo shook his head. “You *are* observant. A practiced watcher.”

“I thought I might find you bleeding on the floor, and I wouldn’t have known what to do.”

“There’s only one thing for you to do, Lainy. Go back to your own apartment. And the next time you hear gunshots - especially with silencers - stay home! You could get into trouble. And don’t spy on strange men. Didn’t your mother ever tell you?”

“I’m not a backward child, Mr. Solo,” she said defiantly.

He let his eyes roam over her. “I can see that.”

Lainy shivered. He had expected her to shrink from the appraisal, but instead she cried, “Oh!” and came to him, chin out and stubborn. “You won’t frighten me off that way.”

“Nevertheless, little girl” - he took her by the elbow, steering her to the door - “I want you out of here.” He yanked open the door and strong-armed her gently into the hall, where she stood staring at him.

“Okay,” she said. “This time. But if you ever need me… and maybe once in a while you could knock on my door on your way by? Just to say hello? Surely you’ve heard of Love Thy Neighbor?”

“I’ve heard. Now, will you go? I have things to do. Things that don’t include young ladies with pet cats.”

She edged away. “Good night, Mr. Solo. It was nice meeting you - just as I thought it would be.”

Solo closed the door and leaned upon it for a moment, chuckling to himself. She was quite a girl. If she possessed any of the ordinary feminine wiles of feigning shyness or playing coy, she had simply thrown them aside for the time being.

The gun in his pocket clanged against the wood of the door and brought him sharply back to the muddled room, the attack, and the report he was bound to make. He glanced warily at the terrace doors and went back to the sofa. He pulled out his transceiver and this time, before he had a chance to call, it started its own bleeping signal.

“Solo here.”

“Yes, Mr. Solo!” It was Waverly, himself, and his voice sounded oddly high and vital, maybe relieved. “So good of you to answer. I wasn’t certain that you would - or *could*.”

Solo digested that one quickly and felt his anger at the two surprise attacks in one day returning. “Is some thing going on that I don’t know about, Mr. Waverly?” he demanded.

“It would seem so. I want you down here right away. And be careful about it. I’m not sure what is happening, hut I do know there’s a coffin waiting for you. Fifteen minutes, Mr. Solo. Come directly to me.”

The transceiver clicked dead in Solo’s suddenly chilled hand. A coffin? He shuddered, focused his mind on the order to make the drive in fifteen minutes, and took to his feet.

Chapter 2

“A Spy in the Ointment”

SOLO MADE the drive quickly, keeping to the law and the traffic signals, but eager to get to Waverly and chase the shudder out of his system. He hadn’t gone two blocks before he knew he was being followed. It was a black Cadillac, and the license numbers were invisible. He wished fervently for a police car to notice the absence of the numbers and pull the Cadillac over, but it didn’t happen.

Evasive action was unnecessary, he decided. Whoever was after him already knew everything about him - his apartment, his whereabouts during the day - so they knew U.N.C.L.E., too. It would do no harm to lead them to Del Floria’s and if he tried to lose them, he’d also lose time. The Cadillac hung back a full two blocks, so he simply increased his speed to gain more distance and headed on.

He pulled up in front of Del Floria’s with a squeal of tires, jumped out of the car, and sprinted to the steps that led down into the tailor shop. Once inside, he was going to stride directly into the back booth, but Del Floria gestured him to a quick halt.

Del Floria said, “Did you know you have blood on your face?”

Solo felt the dried flakes of blood that coated his temple where the shoe had hit him. “Huh! I forgot. Thanks. There’s no sense in alarming the girl at the desk, is there?” He took out his handkerchief and rubbed the dried blotch.

Del Floria took the cloth from him, moistened it in the steam from his pressing machine and handed it back, shoving a mirror forward with his other hand.

Solo wiped the blood clean to find just a slight cut under it. Three days and it would be gone. “The thing is,” he said as he dabbed, “there are unwelcome guests coming close behind me so I’d better clear out before they cause you trouble.”

“The door is ready when you are,” Del Floria said. The sound of a car pulling up outside, and then another immediately after it, thrust Solo’s hand inside his coat. It came out with his gun. “Too late. Maybe it would be best for me to hold them off here than to leave them to you.”

Solo took a semi-sheltered position near the counter, but he had barely slipped the safety off his gun when one car roared away and running footsteps came down the stairs. A girl’s footsteps.

At the first sight of her, Solo holstered his gun again. It was Lainy. She ran into the shop, breathless, calling, “Mr. Solo! Mr. Solo!” She stopped still when she saw him.

“I thought you were safe at home with your cat!” Solo said angrily.

“I followed you. And it’s a good thing I did, too. You just can’t seem to take proper care of yourself at all. Those same two men were right behind you; did you know that?”

“I was aware of it, yes.”

“Oh.” She was disappointed. “But I did do some good. Because I followed them and when they stopped out side I jumped out of my cab and stood on the sidewalk and stared at them. Nasty looking things. But I stared at them so they knew they were identified and they didn’t dare make a move with a witness around, so they left.”

“They’re gone?” Solo asked.

“Gone.”

“Great!” Solo said through his teeth. “And you are some kind of a blue-eyed idiot. While you were getting your look at them, they were getting a good look at you! Didn’t you stop to think they might connect you with me now? That they might threaten you?” He slapped his hand down on the counter hard, resigned. “I’ll have to see you home. There’s no other way. I can’t have you playing cops and robbers in the streets alone.”

Del Floria cleared his throat meaningfully, and when Solo looked at him, the old man simply pointed a finger upward and his lips formed a silent word, “Waverly.

“It’s that important?” Solo asked him.

“He said immediately,” Del Floria answered. “You can’t take anyone home.”

Lainy interrupted, “What are you talking about? Honestly, you two act like a bunch of spies or something.”

“I warned you, Lainy,” Solo told her, “and don’t forget it when you find the going rough. Come on, little girl, you’re in this and in it you’ll stay.” He took hold of her elbow and guided her to the dressing booth, signaling Del Floria to activate the automatic door. Solo pushed Lainy into the booth, one arm around her shoulders, closed the curtains, turned the coat hanger, and the door swung open into the silver-gray interior of U.N.C.L.E. He pulled Lainy through with him and watched her open-mouthed gasp as the door whispered shut be hind them, encircling them in the special inner world of security, counter-plotting, and counter-espionage.

He let go of her and walked to the desk where the receptionist was waiting with a badge, her fingers activating its chemicals as she held it. He leaned over and allowed her to pin it on his lapel. As she finished, she brushed one last bit of blood from his temple, murmuring, “Trouble, trouble.”

“Always. That’s the name of the game.” He pointed to the rack of badges. “I’ll need another one of those for my friend here. A white one.”

The receptionist handed one over and Solo took it to Lainy, attaching it to her dress carefully. She had recovered enough to be curious. “What is this place?” she demanded.

Beyond the receptionist, the main door into U.N.C.L.E. slid open and Illya Kuryakin came through. “When I saw the gun come out in Del Floria’s I started down to give you a hand,” Illya told Solo. “But what is this turn of events?” He looked at Lainy.

“I’ve brought a little bloodhound for you, Illya. Handle her with care.”

Lainy stood between them, peering from one to the other, shaken.

Illya bobbed his head, accepting her presence and his responsibility for it. He said, “Your orders, Napoleon, are to make a fast verbal report to Mr. Waverly, and then dictate a written report. After that you can join us for details.”

Solo grinned. “And how did Mr. Waverly know I had anything to report?”

“The blood-washing was flashed through the building, my friend.”

“Right. But do take care of this one for me.” He pushed Lainy forward. “There’s not a thing in her head but good intentions.” He started away, then turned back. “Her name is Lainy Michaels. She can tell you the rest - if you’ll believe it. This is Illya, Lainy. He’s friendly, so don’t let his frowns frighten you.” Solo hurried away out of sight of the big blue eyes set in the

white face of Lainy Michaels. It was a rude introduction to U.N.C.L.E., and he would have liked to go with her and ease her first encounter, but he knew Illya would be just as taken with her vulnerability as he had been and handle her gently. For the moment, Mr. Waverly was waiting. That couldn't be allowed to continue.

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The reports at last completed, Solo stopped outside Waverly's office to straighten his coat, then took the step that activated the sliding doors, and entered. He stopped again. The room before him was charged with tension.

Mr. Waverly sat in his normal place by the revolving table, the bank of control buttons close at his fingertips. As he glanced up, his eyes held their usual cool look, but they were tired. That was rare in itself, for Mr. Waverly seldom showed fatigue, seeming to have an in exhaustible store of energy that prodded his agents with an imagined whisper of, "If an old man like myself can keep going, I want no groans of effort from you." But now Mr. Waverly appeared to be under a more than usual strain.

Illya sat close to him, fiddling with a pencil, and across the table, extremely alone and small in the cheer less room, sat Lainy. Solo immediately caught the implication of the handkerchief she was twisting in her hands. The girl was frightened.

Waverly said, "All finished with the report, Mr. Solo?"

"Yes, sir," Solo said, still staring at Lainy. As his inquiring eyes met hers, Lainy's changed from fright to accusation.

Waverly ignored the by-play. "Sit down, then, and you can have the rest of the information."

Solo resisted the habit that impelled him toward his accustomed place and went, instead, to sit by Lainy so she wouldn't feel so dismally alone. But he asked no questions. This was Mr. Waverly's show.

Waverly gazed at him coolly. "To put it bluntly, we were brought the announcement of your death. Shortly before I called you. It startled us considerably."

Solo grunted and smiled, but it wasn't a sincere smile. "It was brought into Del Floria's by a woman," Illya said. "She claimed that a great hulk of a man in a taxi gave her the envelope with the charm in it and asked her to deliver it since he was in a hurry. She was to say it was for Mr. Waverly. Well, she delivered it out of kindness, Del Floria detained her at the mention of Mr. Waverly's name, and once we saw what she had, we

questioned her. But she was what she said - innocent." Illya's blue eyes rested on Solo, puzzled, and perhaps a bit relieved.

Mr. Waverly took the story up. "And then you came in with this young woman, and -"

Lainy interrupted him. "And I've had the third degree!" She swiveled to stare at Solo, angry. "I've explained over and over again to these two… men why I followed you here, but they won't believe me. If someone is out to harm you, I have nothing to do with it. Nothing!"

Solo patted her hand. "Of course you haven't"

"It's always wise to be so certain," Illya said quietly.

"I'm not certain about anything!" Solo was surprised at the vehemence of his own tone, but the day, the night, and the constant mystery had built to a frustration he had to blow off somehow. "I'm not especially *happy* about anything, either. Going down fighting is one thing. Ambush is another!"

"Assassination is the proper word, I believe." Illya remained maddeningly calm. "Anyway, we've begun our investigation. Miss Michaels appears to be what she claims - a young girl with more money than she knows how to spend, and with an eye out for adventure."

"A lot you know!" Lainy shouted at him, and immediately began to cry, depositing more tears into the hand kerchief that was already soggy.

Solo put an arm around her shoulders, ignoring the impatient sighs that came from around the table. "What have you been doing to this girl?" he demanded. "I told you to handle her gently, Illya."

"We had to be thorough," Illya said defensively. "She showed up twice with the men who attacked you. We had to question her. After all, it's your life we're trying to preserve."

Lainy stopped crying long enough to babble out, "They say someone is frying to kill you. It isn't me! Truly, it isn't."

"I'm sure of that," Solo told her.

"But Mr. Waverly says I have to stay here inside this building until something is settled."

"For her own safety," Mr. Waverly explained.

"He's right, Lainy,' Solo said.

"But I have to be home!"

"No one has to be home," Illya said definitely.

"I do!" She turned back to Solo, still trusting him. "My cat, Mr. Solo. I told you about my cat. She'll be alone, and -" She dabbed at her eyes, angry

with the tears.

“Don’t worry about your cat,” Solo told her. “We’ll detail someone to go to your apartment at least twice a day to feed her, play with her, and tell her you’ll soon be back.” He caught Mr. Waverly’s disgusted glance but refused to acknowledge it.

“Will you really do that?” Lainy sat up.

“Turn your big eyes on Mr. Waverly. He’s the one with the final say.

She did as she was told, swiveling to face the man whose decisions held more importance than she could even guess. “Mr. Waverly?”

Waverly looked at her and then down at the table. He harrumphed once and surrendered. “We’ll see to your cat, Miss Michaels. It’s not exactly in our line, but we’ll see to her. And you have nothing to fear here, you know. You’ll be well treated.” He pressed a button on his inter com. “I want someone in here immediately to get Miss Michaels settled. She’s to have red-carpet treatment.”

A voice came through the speaker. “Yes, sir. I’ll attend to it myself.”

Lainy smiled. “You’re not an ogre after all, are you?”

The door whisked open and one of Waverly’s secretaries marched in. Lainy stood up hesitantly, her hand on Solo’s shoulder, asking for reassurance. Solo winked at her. She left in the secretary’s wake, docile, timid, but willing.

As the door closed, Illya clucked. “You do pick up strange little creatures, don’t you, Napoleon?”

Solo glanced across the table at him. “You didn’t actually browbeat her, did you?”

“Mr. Solo - please,” Waverly chided. “You know better than that.”

“Yes, sir.” Solo cleared his throat, pushing Lainy out of his mind. She would be led into the deep reaches of U.N.C.L.E., given a pleasant room, a hot bath, food if she wanted it - she would be fine. For himself, there was still a mystery to solve. “Now, where is this charm, or whatever, you were talking about?”

Mr. Waverly reached into an envelope that had remained menacingly before him and pulled out a little piece of metal. “We couldn’t make sense of it at first. Now it’s quite clear.” He sent the charm around to Solo on the revolving table.

Solo picked it up and laid it in the palm of his hand. A charm it definitely was - something a woman might wear on a bracelet - heavy like

lead, but covered with a thick gold patina. Yet no woman would ever wear this particular charm; he shuddered, because it was formed in the shape of a coffin.

“Read what’s written on the back,” Illya told him.

Solo turned the coffin over. He read, “*Number One in Section Two, ad infinitum - one by one*. It was supposed to announce my death, all right. They were certain they couldn’t miss. But this other part - *one by one, ad infinitum*… In other words, it’s not only me, but my position in U.N.C.L.E. they’re after. They want my job vacant.” His brown eyes came up slyly, meeting Illya’s.

“Don’t look at me, Napoleon; I’m not anxious for a promotion.”

“It’s a strange little charm,” Waverly said. “Not very beautiful, really.”

“It’s a herald of death,” Illya said somberly. “Never a pretty subject for art.”

“But why? That’s the problem, Mr. Solo. Why are you being privately attacked? There’s nothing big going on with Thrush. We’ve had no Intelligence.”

“Then U.N.C.L.E. has goofed for once.” Solo let the charm drop from his hand as though it were hot. “Someone is trying to kill me. I want to be pulled off everything else so I can concentrate on who and why.”

“A very bad idea,” Mr. Waverly said. “If this is what it appears to be - an attempt at assassination - you’ll be walking into a trap the moment you set foot outside Headquarters. Nothing in your apartment will be safe for you to touch anymore.”

“If you’ll pardon me for saying it,” Solo said stubbornly, “I’ve always been expendable before, so -”

Mr. Waverly was stern. “Expendability on an assignment is one thing. To be cut down in the street by lunatics is another.”

“I can look after myself, sir.”

“Yes. And incidentally, how was it that those men managed to get into your apartment in the first place? Is there something wrong with the alarm system on your terrace?”

Solo felt his face flush and fought to control it. He had personally disconnected the terrace alarms. But he had thought it would be a normal evening, that Rachel might step outside for some air, and he didn’t want alarms going off all over the place and scaring her.

Mr. Waverly went damningly on. “This isn’t the first time you’ve disconnected your alarm system, is it, Mr. Solo?

“No, sir,” he admitted.

“But it will be the last.”

“Yes, sir.” He stared hard at his hands, taking the chastisement as he had to take it. He had been off base. But Mr. Waverly wouldn’t belabor the point.

As predicted, Waverly changed the subject abruptly. “This is an insidious thing. I’m assigning Mr. Kuryakin to the case. In the meantime, you’ll stay inside the building - night and day. Whoever it is, he’s declared all-out war on us. We won’t *have* an organization if our agents are shot down in the street one by one.” He admitted his own fears. “I’m deeply concerned about this turn of events. It has never happened before, and I don’t like it.”

“Clever enough idea,” Illya put in. “But the methods seem too unsophisticated for Thrush.”

“I agree,” Waverly said. “From the dramatic way he announced his supposed first victim, I’d say we’re dealing with a madman.”

“Jolly,” Solo muttered.

“I’ll find your nemesis for you, Napoleon,” Illya reassured him. “I’ll start by tracing this charm.”

“Then make it fast,” Solo said. “I’ve never liked being caged. And remember the message on the back of the charm. The line for assassination forms right behind me, Illya.”

Illya gazed down at him dourly, and left the room, carrying the tiny coffin with him.

Solo prepared to rise, too. “Well, if I’ve had your final word, Mr. Waverly, I may as well find a bed. Tomorrow I can start on some desk work - perhaps as contact or research director for an active agent.”

“No. I don’t want you on anything vital in Section Two. As a matter of fact, I don’t want you in Section Two at all. For your own safety, I prefer to have you as far away from your normal base as possible.”

Solo fought down his first flare of protest as he realized the implications of what his Chief had said. “I see. In case there’s a spy in the ointment.”

“It’s a possibility. Someone had to know your whereabouts in order to make those attacks possible. So to throw them off, I intend to move you out

of their reach. How, I don’t know, but I’ll think about it. Now you get some sleep. Let me do the worrying.”

Solo stood up, a smile playing about his mouth. “I must say, that order is unusual. You’d better be careful, sir, or you’ll become a father image.”

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The room was small and shabby. The old parchment-shaded lamp cast a gloomy yellow light in a puddle on the rug, and sent fingers of illumination onto the faded wall paper. The furniture was overstuffed and ragged, giving a sure sense that a body settling down in it would produce puffs of dust from its depths. On the tables, on the chairs, on the floor, and everywhere, were stacked books. Old and new, red, green, and brown, they leaned precariously. There was no dust on them. They were well loved.

Louie, the tall killer, and Robard, the short heavy fighter, stood silently in the dim light, watching the old man stalk about before them. Professor Adams pounded his feet down stiff-legged as he paced, hands flapping angrily at his sides. He was a frail man, white haired and wrinkled although he was only fifty-four years old. He had a perpetual squint from reading, and when he focused his eyes they never really focused because there was a glint in them that warned of madness.

Adams stopped his stalking to stand near a leggy end table, his hands resting on some books stacked there. He confronted the two men with his maniacal eyes. “I simply cannot believe that you missed a second time! You made me look foolish. Do you understand? Foolish! Because I sent that coffin and Solo isn’t dead! You robbed me of my sting. How could you have failed?”

Louie muttered, “He’s fast, Professor Adams.”

A thin, bumpy finger pointed at Louis from wrinkled hand. “When I hired you, you assured me you knew your business. That you were in top form.”

Robard stepped closer to Louie. “That guy’s got reflexes we never heard of; hasn’t he, Louie?”

“I didn’t lead you to believe it would be easy,” Adams shouted. “But you took a third of my life’s savings on the promise you could handle it.” He gestured violently about the room. “I never had much to call my own, but now see - now see! I live in a slum because of your high price!” His voice was creaking with rage, and he drew a long breath, caressing his

books, calming himself. “You say he’s gone to ground inside U.N.C.L.E. How long will he stay there is the question.”

“After what I’ve seen of him,” Robard said, “I’d say not long. He won’t like being shut up with nothing to do.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway.” Adams smiled. “I have eyes that reach right inside U.N.C.L.E. Mr. Waverly may think he’s brought his lamb into the fold, but the wolf is in the fold, too.” His laugh was short and sharp, like a sneeze. “Poor little killer Solo. He doesn’t know that every corner in the building can be a deathtrap if I give the word.” The laughter drained from his face, leaving it white and splotched. “I want that man; do you understand? I want him to taste blood. I want him dead! All the killers - dead. And Solo first.”

Louie caught Robard’s attention and shrugged, whirling one finger to indicate he thought Adams was crazy.

Robard asked, “If you feel that way about Solo, what do you have in mind for Louie and me after we finish with him?”

“You two?” Adams sneezed out another laugh. “You’re trembling with that question? You’re not even in Solo’s class! Napoleon Solo is a highly intelligent, capable man, trained and honed in the arts of destruction. He chose his way. A man of potential, turned bad. You two are no threat to the world - only to the gutter.”

Robard inched forward, tense and angry, but Louie grabbed his coattail to pull him back. “Forget it, Robard,” Louie said. “We’re getting paid for the insults, too.” As Robard halted, Louie shifted his to Adams. “If you want Solo that bad, why don’t you use your contact inside the building and get it over with?”

“I might. I might.” Adams smiled. “For the moment I enjoy visualizing him as he walks the corridors thinking he’s safe, and all the time there’s a shadow creeping behind him. And I’ve had second thoughts. I may need him alive for a little while to help me. Once I’ve killed four or five U.N.C.L.E. agents, I can go to Thrush and prove how easy it is to dismember their enemy by simple surprise assassination. Every agent they have. I can command anything I want of Thrush. Don’t you see the perfect beauty of that picture?”

“Tell us what to do and we’ll do it,” Robard said between his teeth. “But don’t ask us to conjure up visions.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll tell you what to do every step of the way. I’m going to accomplish two things at once here. That is the sign of true genius. I’m going to rid the world of a killer and also prove to Thrush what fools they were to underestimate me. They were fools, you know. Giving me bits and pieces of things to work on and never anything spectacular.”

Adams stalked to stand two feet from his hired assassins. “As for my second thoughts about Solo, I want him brought to me alive. A bullet is too quick and easy for him. And too quick to satisfy my revulsion of him.”

“That we can’t do,” Robard said firmly. “I’ll jump out from behind a door and shoot him. I’ll even sit on a flag pole and shoot down at him - but Louie and I can’t take him alive. Not even with Julius to help. It can’t be done.”

“Yes, it can,” Adams said even more firmly. “With the proper planning it can and will be done. Flush him out, capture him, and then -” The laughing sneeze exploded in the room and Louie and Robard edged three steps away from the madman who made it.

Chapter 3

“Go Practice Your Karate”

FOR TWO DAYS, Solo restlessly paced the halls of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, and every time his feet led him automatically toward Section Two, the man at the check point turned him back with a grin and a wave of the hand. The inaction was agonizing. In his mind were al ways the two names he had heard in the fight in his apartment - Louie and Robard. He could almost feel them beneath his hands - their weight, their height, the solidity of their muscles. He longed to pummel them senseless for turning him into a pointless, jumping-at-shadows prowler in his own office.

At the moment, he was prowling the lower sections. Mr. Waverly had kept a maddening silence for two days, had shut him off from all information and briefings, and time had started to wear on his nerves. Even the brief flirtations with the staff beauties had suddenly fallen fiat. There was no future in these flirtations. There seldom had been, but now they were even wary of talking to him, afraid they might let something he wasn’t supposed to know slip out.

He had been imprisoned in filthy little cells for longer durations than this. He had been chained or bound for longer times. He wondered why this confinement was so much worse. But he knew the answer. Here there was no hope of escape. He had absolutely nothing to occupy him except the thought that an assassin waited somewhere, perhaps even inside the building. Louie and Robard, whoever they were, remained outside. He had no concern over them. But there was someone else - someone inside with him - who might appear at any corner, any door recess, and begin blasting at him without warning. He wanted desperately to go outside, track down the brain behind this nasty scheme, and have it out with him. But only Illya was allowed that joy. For himself, he had to keep on pacing and trying to fill the hours.

He walked the smooth, metal corridor alone. No one else was about. They were all shut up in their cubicles with work to do. He marched with

measured strides, setting a destination in his mind.

From the next corner, a shadow fell across the floor. Solo stopped. His hand slid to his gun and had it out and grasped, the safety off, in one fluid movement. He held his breath, waiting.

The shadow lengthened, coming to the corner. A figure took shape, and he sighed. It was Lainy Michaels, her; face squeezed into a confused frown. She halted when she saw the gun pointed at her, but then she laughed. “It’s only me! Do you always carry that thing around?”

Solo stated flatly, “From now on it’s an extension of my hand.” He holstered the gun, relieved that it was only Lainy and not one of the regular staff. He would have looked pretty foolish drawing on one of his friends. “Are you on your way somewhere?”

“I’m just wandering.”

“You’re allowed free run of the halls?” Solo noticed that she wore a badge that would let her onto any floor.

“I’m not, actually,” she admitted. “I was told, and I mean told, to go directly from one place to another, and there are only certain places I can go, but I get lost.” She saw the direction of his gaze. “Oh, the badge. Well, I get lost so often that Mr. Waverly let me have this badge. He said he trusts me to try my best to stay where I’m supposed to be, and if I do get lost, I won’t set off those noisy alarms.”

Solo laughed. So Lainy was responsible for the three alarms of the last two days. He hadn’t been told. It was all reasonable, but surprising that Mr. Waverly had melted enough to trust her with such clearance.

“I feel like a mouse in a maze, Mr. Solo. I was going to the cafeteria.”

“I’ll take you down.”

“Don’t bother if you’re busy. It was just something to do. I’m bored, I guess.”

Solo led her along the corridor anyway, their foot steps falling together as he shortened his stride to accommodate hers. “Do you miss your cat?” he asked.

“Even though you think it’s silly - yes, I do.”

“It’s not silly at all. But she’s being cared for. That’s one thing I’ve been allowed to check.”

“I know.” Lainy giggled. “Twice a day someone rushes to me with a report on how much she ate and played and how she’s feeling. I think I’m

causing quite a bit of commotion, and it seems so funny. I guess I own the first Pussycat from U.N.C.L.E.”

“Keep causing the commotion. It relieves the boredom.”

“You re bored, too? I’ve heard people talking about how you’re cut off from everything. How do you fill your time?”

“I’m on my way now for a Karate work-out. Practice makes bruises and they’re better than nothing. You can at least contemplate them.” He stopped, an idea forming to help her as well as himself. “Would you like to come along?”

She was suddenly, unexplainably nervous. “I don’t know a thing about Karate.”

“To *watch*, Lainy! To watch!”

“Oh, yes, then. I’d like it. No one gets hurt, do they?”

“Let’s hope not.” He circled her waist with his arm. “If anyone does, it’s Mr. Solo, because the instructor is about seven feet tall and five feet across.”

His contagious grin spread an imitation of itself over her face. “If you know about that kind of thing, Mr. Solo - Karate and Judo and all - I guess my mother *should* have told me. I picked a dangerous man to spy on, didn’t I?”

“More dangerous by the minute, little girl. Anyway, maybe you can pick up some pointers to use on your boyfriend.”

“That’s not the idea at all, Mr. Solo.”

“Don’t tell me that two days inside U.N.C.L.E. have turned you into a femme fatale!”

“I only wish you believed it,” she said.

–

Two more days of inaction and Solo finally commanded his way into Mr. Waverly’s office to wait for the older man and air some of his gripes. The whole process of hiding inside the building was ridiculous to him; worse, because with every day his nerves stretched more tautly, his reflexes sharpened themselves, until he was a loaded gun with a finger pressing the trigger. The thing had to be settled. Waverly wouldn’t be happy to see him, but after four days of no communication, Waverly had no choice.

The door at last flew open and Alexander Waverly came in. He glanced at Solo once as he went to his accustomed place. He sat down, laid his pipe

before him with the papers he had been carrying, and cleared his throat. “Well, Mr. Solo,” he said, “do you suppose we need a mediator?”

Solo didn’t respond with the grin Waverly expected. Instead he answered grumpily, “If things don’t clear up, we might, sir.”

“Nerves - Waverly bobbed his head - see.” His tone was understanding, almost condescending, and it jerked little rivulets of anger along Solo. “It would seem to me, Mr. Solo, that U.N.C.L.E. has tremendous resources for the venting of nervous energy. Go practice your Karate, or your marksmanship. You do have to keep in trim.”

“I’ve already done those things, sir. All day and half the night.”

“Really.” Waverly sent Solo a chilly, estimating stare that made the agent uncomfortable. “Then I’ll have to find something for you - to keep you occupied - to exercise your brain.”

Solo brightened. “That’s what I’ve been waiting for, sir. I didn’t join this organization to sit around the office.”

“But you *will* sit around the office,” Waverly said evenly. “And you’ll make the least possible nuisance of yourself while you do it.”

Solo stared down at the table, feeling oddly as though he’d had his knuckles rapped by a schoolteacher.

Waverly was still considering his course. “I had you cut off from office information for your own good, you know. When you don’t know what is going on, you are less prone to rush in where you shouldn’t be. But - yes - some honest work will do you good.” He pressed a stud on his intercom.

A woman’s voice came over the speaker. “Files and Documents. Mada Adams.”

Mr. Waverly said, “I understand you’re short of help in your department this week. Could you use an extra pair of hands?”

Solo sat up straighter, astonishment growing on his face.

Mada Adams came through loudly, “Could I! I mean - yes, sir, I’m quite a bit behind. I’m in this department alone.”

Waverly told her, “I’m sending you a new man. I think he’ll break in quite easily. He knows the alphabet and he’s dexterous.” His cool eyes came around to Solo with a scowl at the agent’s apparent disgust. “Just beware of his bared teeth, Miss Adams.” Waverly switched off the intercom.

Solo was still astonished. “Really, Mr. Waverly, you’re not asking me to become a file clerk!”

“Report to Miss Adams, and see that you do a good job if it.”

“When I asked for work, I didn’t mean busywork! I meant something meaningful.”

“You are off limits at the moment, Mr. Solo - restricted from everything in Policy, Enforcement, and Intelligence. And let me remind you, there isn’t anything that goes on inside this building that isn’t meaningful”

Solo surrendered, resigned, but definitely unhappy with his new orders. As he started away, Mr. Waverly called after him, a hint of a chuckle in his voice, “Try not to get any paper cuts. They can be nasty little devils.”

–

Solo traveled through the maze of U.N.C.L.E. corridors and elevators, his step slow, headed for Files and Documents and Mada Adams, whoever she was. He entered the Section, found her door, and invaded her private inner sanctum. It was a smallish room done completely in U.N.C.L.E. steel. The walls were stacked high with filing cabinets, and empty ladders scaled up and down to render the top drawers accessible.

There was one big desk piled deep in filing folders, and in front of the desk was Mada Adams. She was a lovely young woman, and lovely was the only word for her. Her dark hair was wavy, but cut austerely short. Her face was shiny and healthily clean. Her figure was definitely not of glamorous proportions, but nice. She was unspectacular all around, but lovely nevertheless. The type of girl some men would “take home to mother.”

She was leafing through a stack of folders when Solo came in and called, “Files and Documents? Mada Adams?”

Her reaction was startling. She looked at him, her brown eyes flashed, and she nearly dropped the entire stack of folders. She plunked them down and scurried in an obvious retreat around her desk, her nervous hands attesting to the fact that she thought she needed the desk’s protection. “Mr. - Solo!” she said with an explosion of breath. “Uh… yes. Files and Documents. Is there something I can do for you?”

“It’s supposed to be the other way around.” Solo eyed her closely, equally startled. “I’m here to work for you. Mr. Waverly sent me.”

Her expression was entirely blank.

“He just spoke to you five minutes ago, Mada.”

“Yes,” she stammered, “he’s sending me a new man -”

“And here I am.”

“Not you, Mr. Solo. Don’t play the joke out any further. Please! I mean, I know you like to kid around, but - please.”

Solo pivoted in the middle of the room, peering at the file drawers. “All this? Hasn’t the microfilm system reached this far?”

“We keep our records three ways,” she explained, but didn’t calm down. “Microfilm, computer tape, and these originals. Caution and care. Now, what file do you want to see? And why didn’t you go to Microfilm to get it?”

“I told you, Mada, I’m here to become a file clerk, not to do research.”

“But that will never do!” She was adamant. “It just won’t do!”

“I can climb ladders and take the high places for you.”

“But I don’t want anyone from Section -” She dropped off.

Solo stared straight at her. “Section Two?”

She flushed. “I was going to say that, yes.”

“If you intend to insult me,” Solo said levelly, “do it and get it over with.”

Her thin fingers dropped to the stacks of folders and she riffled them anxiously. “I didn’t mean to make you angry. It’s just that -” She drew a deep breath and plunged into her real meaning. “I’ve always, been afraid of you men in Section Two. You carry guns, and -”

Solo smiled at her. He’d try anything to ease her tension. “Guns don’t go off unless the trigger is pulled, Mada. I’m not planning to shoot up the filing cabinets.”

“I *have* insulted you.”

“Only puzzled me. Aside from the guns, is there any thing else you don’t like? Because I can leave my gun outside, you know.”

“I’m timid and neurotic, I guess,” she admitted, and the admission was somehow feminine and understandable as it came from her. “But you all strike me as trained tigers. I see you sometimes in the corridors and I keep close to the walls.”

Solo shook his head, amazed. This was a peculiar little violet to find shrinking in the depths of the building. “Why on earth did you join U.N.C.L.E. if you feel this way? A person shouldn’t be afraid of his job. You need to take yourself in hand.” He softened his voice. She really was frightened of him and it made him uncomfortable. “Look, give me a chance to prove how wrong you are - to show you my gentle side.” He strode

toward her, his arm outstretched to take her by the shoulders and calm her down. “Even tigers can purr. And I promise, I’m not a man-eater.”

She eluded him neatly, but like a girl who’d had little practice. “Not a lady-eater, either, Mr. Solo. At least not this lady.”

He lowered his arms, rebuffed. “We’ll see. Mr. Waverly asked us to work together, after all.”

Even that magic name couldn’t sway her. “What you have in mind and what Mr. Waverly had in mind are entirely different things.” She grabbed a stack of file folders and thrust them at him. He took them quickly to keep them from spilling on the floor. “Here, Mr. Solo. Practice on these. I’ll have more for you when you’ve finished.”

He laughed. “All right. You win. Where are the R’s for Rejected?”

Chapter 4

“I’d Hate to Die for a Parking Space”

ILLYA KURYAKIN parked his car in the tight parking slot and got out, headed for the dental supply laboratory that waited for him behind a closed door. After four days, he and the men working with him had exhausted every sensible source of gold supply in the city, and now he was down to trudging about to dental supply labs searching for bits and pieces.

He hurried because it was so important. Every time he saw Napoleon, the need for hurry was more apparent. The inactivity was beginning to tell on his friend, and Illya couldn’t even help him by giving him details on the progress of the search. He was allowed to say, “No luck,” and that was all. If the time came when he did have some luck, he supposed he would have to lie to Napoleon. But he had done worse things than that for Mr. Waverly.

He pushed through the door and entered a little waiting room. There were a few straight chairs around the walls and one long counter that stretched the full width of the back wall. On it were displayed false teeth in various stages of development. Some appeared ready to bite.

Illya went to the left end of the counter, away from the clerk who was waiting on the one other customer in the store. Illya looked at them. The clerk was lanky and nondescript. The customer was an older man, gray haired, with glasses and a habit of biting his lip. They were talking quietly, and Illya shifted from foot to foot, too impatient to pretend he enjoyed waiting.

The clerk soon was in front of him. “Yes, sir? Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” Illya said. “I have a rather odd request. I’d like to buy some gold shavings - any scraps you might have left from inlays or crowns.”

The clerk smiled. “That’s not really so odd. Not today. You’re my second non-dentist customer for gold. When it rains -”

“Yes, I know,” Illya said. “The point is, do you have such scraps and do you ever sell them?”

“As I was just telling the gentleman here” - he indicated the older man - “we’re not in that business. Most of our dentists mold their own crowns and the scraps are turned over to the Ladies’ Dental Auxiliary. Charity, you know.”

Illya gazed at the older man again, a new interest in his eyes. “You’re looking for gold?” Illya asked him,

“To fulfill a hobby,” the old man said,

“Jewelry making?”

“No. I collect rare books. I like to restore the gold on the bindings, myself.”

“Oh, too bad. I thought I might have found a fellow jewelry buff.” At that moment, a phone set up a loud ringing in the back of the shop. The clerk puttered between the sound and his customers for long seconds, then excused himself and went out through a door in the back wall. Illya watched the old man, taking in everything about him from the well-bitten lip to the strange gleam in his squinting eyes.

The old man didn’t like the inspection, and said, “Neither of us is going to find anything here.” He pushed off from the counter and headed away. “I wish you luck somewhere else.”

“But you give up too easily,” Illya called after him. “I intend to wheedle some more.”

“Good day, then. I warn you - that clerk won’t be wheedled.” The old man marched outside and directly to an old-model blue Chevy parked at the curb. He got into the back seat where Robard was waiting.

“No luck, Professor Adams?”

“Much luck,” Adams said. “I didn’t get any gold, but I ran into Solo’s heir apparent. Illya Kuryakin. U.N.C.L.E. is close on our trail, I’m afraid, and with their methods, they may find us.”

“So?” This word came from the front seat, uttered in a deep, hollow voice that resounded from the massive chest of a giant man who sat behind the wheel. He was even tall sitting down, with a bulbous head, a lantern jaw, and ears that stood out from his head as though they were pasted on. His hands dwarfed the wheel. Their power could have twisted it off the steering column.

“So, Julius,” Professor Adams addressed the giant, “I want Kuryakin stopped in his tracks. Before he reports in.”

“He’s in the lab now?” Robard asked. “Then I saw him go in. That’s his car right ahead of us.”

Adams looked at the car. “I should have guessed. It’s fancy enough for a paid killer.”

Robard’s hand fumbled inside his coat and came out with a pistol. Adams pushed Robard’s hand down. “No guns! That’s much too crude. We must think of some thing else, and above all, keep him from seeing us. He stared straight at me inside, but he can’t really know anything:” Adams rubbed his nose hard. “Yes,” he sighed. “Yes.” He leaned forward to speak to the giant Julius, his words coming out slowly, one by one, as though Julius couldn’t understand or assimilate them any other way. “Now, Julius, listen carefully and remember every thing I say. You’ll have to do this alone. Robard and I are leaving the car. Wait until we get around the corner, and then…”

–

Inside the lab, Illya was glad to see the clerk reappear. He had no time to waste in waiting. He snapped right back into his demand for gold. “You don’t happen to know of any place where I can get a bit of gold? Please think. It’s very important.”

“Sorry. Most people don’t go around buying gold.”

“Some do,” Illya said. “You’ve never sold any scraps?”

“Not a one. It’s against our policy. I’d suggest you get it from wherever you’ve gotten it before.”

“But that’s -” Illya was interrupted by the crash of metal from the street. When he checked, there was his car locked in bumper-to-bumper combat with the car behind it. He broke from the counter and ran outside.

He stood on the curb, estimating the damage. The U.N.C.L.E. car was jammed from the rear, edged side ways against the curbstone. The old Chevy behind it looked like some shovey monster which had just attacked. In that same moment, the Chevy gave a roar, a grinding of gears, and lurched back a meager foot, disengaging itself. A great bulbous head stuck out of the driver’s window and a deep voice bellowed:

“Is that your car? Sorry, mister. I thought I was in reverse all the time.”

“Hold on a minute,” Illya called. “I’ll see if there was much damage.”

Illya squeezed between the bumpers and checked the rear of the U.N.C.L.E. car first. “Mine seems all right. Just a scratch. I’ll check yours.”

He turned around to inspect the grill of the Chevy when another roar from the motor straightened him with a quick prickle of hair on the nape of his neck that squealed DANGER! The old car roared and leapt forward.

In one motion, Illya lurched up from in front of it, his left hand hitting the hood to propel him sideways, and landed on the trunk of the U.N.C.L.E. car as the Chevy smashed into it again. He crouched there, taking stock. He was whole except for a scrape on his left ankle and the loss of his left shoe. That was wedged between the metal somewhere.

“For -! What are you trying to do?” Illya shouted at the great head in the front seat of the Chevy. “Break both my legs?”

Again came the booming, hollow, “Sorry, mister, I thought I was in reverse again. I guess I got nervous.”

“Calm down. For my sake.” Illya jumped easily from the trunk of his car and onto the sidewalk. “Let me direct you out of here before you kill somebody.”

He had a clearer view of the giant now and was taken aback. This was no ordinary flustered citizen. This was some form of throwback to the bleary history of mankind. But he shrugged the notion aside. If you stayed on a city’s streets long enough you met every kind and every shape eventually. He walked close to the driver, talking calmly. “Now put it in reverse and back up carefully so I can get my shoe. It could have been my foot caught down there!” He directed the man in the short backing maneuver. The man obeyed willingly enough. “Stop now,” Illya told him, “and don’t touch a thing!”

Illya darted to the front, made a stabbing motion and came up with his shoe. Hopping about, he got it on his foot. “I’ll drive out first so you’ll have plenty of room, all right? If you dare touch that gas pedal before I’m out of here -” The giant man turned his head to look him full in the face, and he stopped the threat in mid-voice. There was something about those little eyes set in the craggy face, and those huge, gnarled hands on the wheel. Standing up, this man would measure at least six-feet-eight. And the stare he was giving Illya - it wasn’t embarrassed, it wasn’t apologetic anymore - it was just plain menacing. “Don’t move the car, that’s all,” Illya said in a smaller voice. “I’d hate to die for a parking space.”

He sprinted to his car, jumped in, and thanked the tuned U.N.C.L.E. motor for pulsing to life so fast. He barreled out of the space and down the street, watching the rearview mirror to pick up the license number of the

Chevy. He also caught the queer drama being played out in the front seat. The giant was still sitting there, but his hands came up to his face and fell back onto the wheel. It was a gesture of frustrated defeat. He had failed in something. Illya wondered what.

–

Illya returned the car to the loving hands of the mechanics in the U.N.C.L.E. garage, and drove into the heart of the great building to play out a hunch. He had no real basis for wanting a check run through the computers, but something gnawed at the back of his mind and he was too old a hand at this type of thing not to cater to his gnawings. First he reported the license number of the Chevy, but told the girl on duty and swamped with priority work not to hurry with it. He explained it as a routine check. She promised to get to it as soon as she had an extra minute.

Next he went down a level and dug up an artist who drew a composite likeness of the giant who had been driving. As the face formed under his pencil, the artist shivered, and Illya patted him on the back. “I didn’t say he was pretty. Just run it through for me, will you? You have a tremendous likeness there. Maybe the computer can give a name for it.”

“Did Mr. Waverly tell you we got some results on those two composites Solo had me draw?” The man was proud of his work, of his ability to draw a face from a description and actually have a name put to it. “Louie Salter and Robard Farell. The Police Department identified them. We didn’t have them in our banks because they’re petty gangsters.”

Illya nodded. “Unemployed gunmen. Yes - Waverly told me. But it only adds to the confusion, doesn’t it?”

He left the man to his work and continued down on the elevator. He should have discovered the giant’s name for himself at the time of the incident. But he’d had no real reason to be curious. It was just an accident, after all. He still had no reason, but curious he was. The more he let his mind dwell on it, the more clearly he could hear the crunch and snap that might have been his leg bones if the giant had been able to rev the car forward faster. Deliberate? Maybe he’d know tomorrow when the reports came in.

He walked until he came to Files and Documents. He wanted to see Napoleon and bask in Solo’s disgust at his new job. File clerk. Illya had yet to see him in the actual throes of work, and as he stepped into the file room he looked devilishly forward to it.

The door whooshed open and he found Napoleon, his arms laden with filing folders, and a young woman whom he presumed to be Mada Adams. Napoleon turned quickly at the sound of the door, his face taut. He relaxed as he recognized Illya. He plunked down his stack of folders and warned him, “Careful, Illya, you’re stepping into foreign territory. Mada doesn’t like Enforcement Agents.”

Illya pretended to be disappointed. “How unfortunate. And I like file clerks so well. Some of my best friends are file clerks.”

Napoleon caught the message and grimaced, but Mada Adams only smiled. “After two days of working with Mr. Solo,” she said, “I confess I’m starting to change my mind.”

“Finesse, charm, and savoir faire will do it every time,” Solo said, pleased with himself. But when he looked at Illya again, he was sober. “You’ve come with . some news, I hope. Any leads? On the gold? The men?”

“Not yet,” Illya said bluntly.

Solo gestured to Mada. “Hand me Mr. Kuryakin’s file, Mada. I want to put it under Inactive Agents!”

“Napoleon!” Illya protested. “This isn’t an easy thing. There -” He stopped. He couldn’t go too far or Solo s quick mind would jump ahead of him and come up with knowledge he wasn’t allowed to have. To preclude the chance, Illya turned the sentence to a joke. “Remember, I don’t have your splendid brain to guide me.”

Solo wasn’t having any jokes and he wasn’t laughing. “Waverly refuses to allow me even a glimpse of my own case file. I’m surprised he hasn’t asked me to turn in my gun for the duration!”

“Give us time,” Illya said. “We’ll solve it.” He didn’t like the tension in Solo, the too-quick reflexes, the anger huddled beneath the surface of everything he said.

“I don’t have much more time, Illya! If I want some action, maybe I’ll have to break out of here and join Thrush!”

“I see. You’re spoiling for a fight. Why don’t you go to the gym and practice your Karate?”

“Not you, too!” Solo exploded.

Illya looked to Mada for an explanation of the reaction, and she laughed. “He’s been working out twice a day, Mr. Kuryakin. I don’t think

the instructor will let him in anymore. He's worried about the frustration-aggression cycle and his own Japanese bones."

As Mada gestured to make her point, the charm brace let she was wearing clattered and jingled. Solo shook his head and said gruffly, "Must women always have sound effects with their jewelry?"

"I'm sorry." Math clutched the bracelet to silence it. "I think," Illya interrupted, "that tinkling and rattling women are charming. Your bracelet is, too. May I see it?" He didn't really want to look at it. He had seen enough charms when he saw the one that resided in Napoleon's case file. But he wanted to turn the conversation before the girl was somehow hurt by Solo's newly-sharpened tongue.

Mada thrust her hand forward so he could inspect the bracelet. "It's silly, really," she said. "Sentimental. You see, each charm represents some event in my life."

Illya held her hand gently as he pretended interest. His biggest interest was expressed in the one word he uttered. "Silver."

"This dollar sign," she explained, "is my job here at U.N.C.L.E. The diploma is obvious. The ship is the trip I took to Paris - a graduation present from my Uncle Abel."

"Everyone should have an Uncle Abel," Illya said, feeling strange keeping up this chatter. Napoleon was the one who made small talk with pretty women. "They're lovely trinkets, Mada. Almost unique, I would say."

"Unique to my life. But you can buy them anywhere."

"You should see mine!" Solo cut in. "It comes in two shapes - coffin and coffin."

Mada flushed. "I'll take the bracelet off if it bothers you. I never thought -"

"Don't even consider it." Solo patted her arm in apology. "If you can put up with me in this state, I can put up with that."

Illya stepped away. "I'm sorry you're at such loose ends, Napoleon. But I think you have a good opponent here. You quarrel with her, do your work, and I'll get back to mine."

Solo suddenly slapped his hand down on a stack of folders. "It's not only your work anymore, Illya. I've had it. A full week and nothing stirring. I see the alphabet in my dreams! From now on, I'm working on my own case."

“But Mr. Waverly -”

“This is one time he’ll find out what it’s like to be up against his own Enforcement Section. I won’t let him refuse me. It’s my life and my coffin and I’m going to fight for it, myself.”

Solo was so determined, his eyes glinting, that Illya shrugged off his own compunctions. “Come On, then. I’ll back you up. I can’t see you as a file clerk, either.”

–

Solo and Illya sat in Waverly’s office. Solo had entered red-faced and seething, but Mr. Waverly had listened, letting his agent spill out all of his venom, while he, himself, sat calmly tamping away at the tobacco in his unlit pipe. Now Solo was in control of his emotions. Illya Kuryakin had waited silently, but just his presence had backed Solo’s demands.

Solo finished up. “So it’s clear to me that I have to make the next move myself, sir. You don’t go fishing by hiding and expecting the fish to jump ashore. You dangle bait.”

Kuryakin finally spoke. “I agree with Napoleon, sir. Our tries at finding the source of gold could run on for weeks. There’s no guarantee that the gold was even purchased. It might have been melted down from old jewelry.”

Waverly glanced up, confronting his young agent with the blunt question, “And you want to become the bait, Mr. Solo?”

“Good, juicy bait,” Solo said.

“Then here is a surprise for you both.” Waverly laid down his pipe. “I agree. This situation is intolerable, so you may as well put an end to it - one way or another.”

Solo swallowed hard, acknowledging the threat Waverly had implied.

“Besides, gentlemen, something else has come up. I received a communication - unbelievable really, but disturbing.” He opened the folder that rested before him,

drew out a piece of paper, and sent it around to them. Solo picked it up. It was ordinary, dime-store stationery, and on it was printed in big, misshapen letters, *Dear Alexander Waverly: By the time you read this the great grain bowls of the world will be harboring maggots. Operation Breadbasket will be underway. Happy hunger. Thrush.*

“That’s a ridiculous piece of writing,” Solo said.

“I agree again,” Waverly answered. “Perfectly ridiculous. I gather I am supposed to believe that Thrush would actually send such a warning of their plans.”

“You don’t, of course,” Illya said.

“No. But aside from that, I have an idea that this note is the work of the maniac who is after Mr. Solo. The grandiose play, the melodramatics, are the product of the same mind. However, on the chance that it is genuine and Thrush is up to something called Operation Breadbasket, I’m going to need you, Mr. Solo - need you active and in the field. I can’t have you working as a fill-in for sick file clerks any longer. That’s why I’m going along with your demands to get out and confront your assassins. I’m reluctant to admit it, but it’s even beginning to paralyze me.”

“How do you mean, sir?” Solo asked.

“I hesitate to send any agent out of this building, for any reason, when I know that anyone he passes in the street may be an assassin. I even worry about you, Mr. Kuryakin, when you go home at night.”

Illya answered firmly, “But he made it very clear that Napoleon is his first target.”

“Yes,” Mr. Waverly said. “That’s the only thing that makes my position tenable at all. This thing must be stopped.”

Illya brought up all of their worst doubts. “And if it’s a new Thrush method? Official Thrush policy?”

“For the sake of U.N.C.L.E., we must hope it isn’t.”

Solo said, “That’s why I want to take this in my own hands, sir, and find out what’s behind it.”

“I’ve already given my consent to that.”

Solo sighed, gratified.

“But I do insist that you have a bodyguard with you at all times. When I need you, I want you alive.”

“A bodyguard of my choice?” Solo asked.

“If you prefer it that way.”

“I choose Illya,” Solo said. “Around the clock.”

“Not even with time off for good behavior?” Illya protested, but he was clearly pleased.

“You two set a plan, then.” Waverly considered the matter settled and was already clearing away the loose ends. “If it makes any sense, I’ll authorize it. We must let it be known that you’re going outside, of course.”

“Everyone must know,” Illya agreed. “Not even juicy bait like Napoleon can catch fish in an empty pond. And if there is a spy among us he’ll have to know enough details to make the assassins jump.”

Waverly nodded. “I’ll spread the word by the office grapevine. It works when I don’t want it to, so for a change I’ll put it to use for myself.” He glanced up once more, stuck the unlit pipe in his mouth, and smiled. “I imagine everyone concerned will be greatly relieved to know the bear has quit stalking our halls.”

Solo laughed out loud. He felt a man again. His gun waited his command under his arm, he had a plan to work out, and the prospect of danger and victory on whatever dark street his assassin chose to stand and. fight.

Chapter 5

“Never Insult a Neanderthal”

SOLO AND ILLYA cruised out and far away from the U.N.C.L.E. garage, Solo at the wheel of the hard-top sedan. It was already dark on the streets and the motor hardly dented the quiet. They had chosen the late hour to give themselves an edge. Fewer pedestrians and less traffic meant more chance of spotting a shadower, more chance of picking out a killer.

The plan was set. The people inside U.N.C.L.E. had been surprised when the rumors started circulating about the plan, but they had happily circulated them anyway. Usually rumors came in scatterings of bits and pieces, but this one was detailed. Some clerks had been reluctant to pass it on, feeling they knew too much about a Section Two operation. But they had passed it on, surrendering to the human failing.

Solo, wheeled the car into the first official turn, heading down a dim side street. The plan was simple. He and Illya would drive the streets slowly, keeping to little-used ways that would give them the least congestion. The route was carefully chosen, and along that route were ten checkpoints, each a mile apart, where U.N.C.L.E. agents waited to record their passing, check the street behind them, and give assistance if an attack developed.

They were well away from Headquarters in a part of the city Solo didn’t know very well. It was the right part for their purpose. The route would take them in a large circle, and then they would start over again.

Solo drove with his hands loose on the wheel, his eyes moving constantly from the road to the rearview mirror, to the side mirror, and on to check alleyways and windows. Illya did the same. But the car droned for twenty minutes and nothing happened.

Finally Illya said, “We were certainly right. We chose nicely deserted streets.”

Solo smiled at his bodyguard. “Bombs are messy, and if any are to be thrown at us, I don’t want bystanders getting cut up.”

Illya straightened himself on the seat after peering out the back window. “Our route is known, our car is known - they should make their move pretty soon.”

“I wish they would.”

“Nervous?”

“It could be called that,” Solo admitted, moving his hands on the wheel to wipe off some of the sweat on his palms. “There’s no reason for them to wait for the attack until the second time around. They know we’re here, and they know why.”

“They also know it’s a trap,” Illya said encouragingly. “The point is, do they want you badly enough to take the chance?”

“No. The point is, *I* want *them*.”

“Right. But remember, if anything happens, stay on the planned route so we’ll be in shouting distance of our backstops.”

“Just be a good little bodyguard and forget the back-seat driving, okay?”

–

U.N.C.L.E. agent Harry Archer, who a few days before had gotten lucky and discovered the lab where Dundee did his business, stood alone in the dark alley. He was officially Checkpoint Eight. The alley made him nervous. Not for himself, but for Solo. He hadn’t understood the reasoning behind sending Solo out on deserted streets to bring a killer out of hiding. He liked Solo - Kuryakin, too. What happened to one of them would happen to the other; a bunched target was easy to hit.

Archer checked his watch, decided it was time to call in, and activated his transceiver. “Archer at Point Eight,” he said. “They’re not in sight yet.”

Waverly’s voice answered him soberly. “They’ve just passed Point Five. They’re moving very slowly. Give them a few minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” Archer said. Move slowly and bunch your targets even more, he thought uneasily.

“And, Archer,” Waverly came through again, “since you’re one of the farthest points out - be ready. The move has to be made soon. If it happens, call me for help, and then give Mr. Solo assistance.”

“Yes, sir. I have the procedure drilled in my mind.” Archer closed down his transceiver, reluctant to break contact. He hoped in the depths of himself to get in on this action. He agreed with Solo about this nasty business. When they had last talked in the cafeteria, Solo had been angry - at fate, at Thrush, at everything. To put your life on the line for a reason was one

thing; but to be attacked in the dark by assassins was vicious. Archer wanted to attack the assassins in return.

A bare whisper of sound caught his attention. It came from the back of the alley. He would normally have thought, *cat*, and let it go, but not tonight. Tonight be whirled around, and in the dim shadows he made out a figure. His stomach clenched. A mugger? A robber? Or the assassin?

The figure moved and it was gigantic. A giant of a man was standing at the end of the alley. He was a cross between an ape and a prehistoric throwback. Only the gun he pointed at Archer put him in the twentieth century.

Archer went for his own gun. It was firmly in his hand, the safety off, when another sound hit him, again from behind, but in the direction of the street. Even as he pivoted he saw the descent of a heavy gun butt, his head was struck at the temple, and the alley disappeared in a deeper blackness. He fell, and that was the last he knew.

Louie, tall and thin, stood over Archer's body and hollered for the towering Julius. "Get to the car, Julius. It's time."

Julius came lumbering by, his big feet in the over sized shoes looking the weighted boots of Frankenstein's Monster. Then Julius was gone and Louie was alone with the unconscious agent. Louie pointed his gun at Archer's head, shrugged and lowered it. Maybe Adams wanted them all dead, but for himself, he had nothing against U.N.C.L.E. agents. He didn't really know what U.N.C.L.E. was.

He strode to the street and the waiting car, smiling. It would soon be done. With the details they'd gotten from inside U.N.C.L.E., it had been easy to find the scattered backup agents, and easy to take this one out of action For all the hatred and fear U.N.C.L.E. generated in the old Professor, Louie thought they had done a lousy job of concealing themselves in the alleys.

–

In the car, Illya checked the rear window for the hundredth time. Solo felt his friend's movement and countered with a careful gaze forward. Illya turned back, a set expression on his face. "I think we're being followed," he said softly.

"All right" Solo gulped in a deep breath, preparing himself. "This is it. The question is, do we let them catch us?"

“Lead them close to our backstops so we’ll have help. We just passed Point Six. Let Seven and Eight check them out and we’ll stop them near Nine. That way we’ll be sure.”

“Make the report,” Solo ordered.

Illya opened the glove compartment. Inside, a small radio glowed. He spoke into the microphone. “Mr. Waverly, we’ve had a nibble. We’re being tailed by a blue Chevy, old model. If he follows us when we make the turns for Points Seven and Eight, we’ll know. We’ll stop at Nine.”

Waverly’s voice came into the car. “Put on some speed, Mr. Kuryakin, as though you’re trying to lose them. We want no false alarms.”

Illya returned the microphone to the glove box, then braced himself wisely as Solo’s foot pressed harder on the accelerator.

The U.N.C.L.E. car eased forward, gaining speed. In the rearview mirror, Solo watched the other car dig into the cement to catch up. He kept his foot pressure steady, maintaining a set speed, forcing his hands to stay relaxed on the wheel. He didn’t want to get too tense, too full of adrenalin. Not yet

The next turn came at him and he wrenched the wheel to the right, squealing around the corner. Behind him, the blue Chevy made it at the last minute. It was coming for him, all right. Let it come. He smiled into the night being cut by his head-lamps.

He calculated from the map in his mind and said, “Point Seven coming up, Illya.”

“And straight away to Eight.” Illya’s voice was throaty. He was getting an edge on, too. Both of them were priming themselves, pacing themselves to Point Nine and the confrontation.

Solo sped on, his eyes roving the street ahead and coming to rest briefly on a recessed doorway where a fellow agent should be maiming Point Seven. And there he was. The agent raised his hand in a sign of recognition, then pivoted to watch the blue Chevy. He was soon out of Solo’s sight.

“It’s coming on faster,” Illya said. “Catching up.”

Solo pressed back against the seat and stamped on the accelerator. He had to elude the blue car until Point Nine because that was the plan. Waverly would have called ahead and set everything up to meet it

Illya gasped, “Don’t kill us before we get there!”

“Hang on,” Solo warned him. “Here’s the last corner.” The U.N.C.L.E. car barely made the turn, careening, and narrowly missing a collision with

the opposite curb. But the blue car hung on, incredibly gaining on the distance until it was only seventy feet from Solo's bumper. Souped up, he thought. A camouflaged hot-rod.

This street, leading past Point Eight where Archer waited, was nastily narrow, and Solo wished he hadn't chosen it as part of the route. But there was no traffic, and very little light was cast by the street lamps. He could speed here as though the devil were after him. And the devil was.

One block ahead, lights appeared to the right and a car crawled out of an alley. Solo let up on his momentum and veered to the center of the street, his hand hard on the horn. But the car - a black Cadillac - didn't stop. It came into the street and across it, braking in the center, blocking the way.

Solo stamped the brakes, pumping to slow, then hitting them with all the strength in his leg. Slowing wasn't going to do it. But a complete stop was out of the question with the Chevy so close.

The Cadillac stayed in the street and he barreled at it, then wrenched the wheel to the left, taking the curb to pass on the sidewalk. He wobbled between two lamp posts and steered back to the right to avoid hitting the brick buildings. He would just make it

Nastily, the Cadillac lurched ahead, jumping the curb in front of him. The sidewalk was blocked!

Solo's foot crushed the brake pedal and he brought the car to a neck-wrenching halt two feet from the Cadillac, jerked it into reverse, and then stopped all action. For the blue Chevy had jammed itself in behind him and he was blocked from both ends.

The street loomed empty on Illya's side, but there was no cover there. It would have to be his side, then, with the brick building towering upwards. His hand reacted, coming up with his gun, in unison with Illya's. He touched Illya briefly and motioned to the left, directing him to follow.

Solo jumped from the car, leaving his door open and crouching behind it for shelter. Illya scrambled out, hit the sidewalk and opened the back door of the car to give them a little box of protection. Solo faced the Cadillac, and Illya crouched the other way, ready to take on the Chevy.

The Cadillac spewed forth its contents and Solo's stomach clenched in on itself as he saw the thin figure of Louie, followed by the giant man Illya had described. It could only be that same man. There wouldn't be two alike - not in the world.

He jerked his head back to see what Illya had lured out of the Chevy. It was Robard. And an old man. This was the moment, then. He and Illya would have to hold them off alone until the backstop from Point Eight made it to the scene.

A high, hard voice echoed at Solo from the rear. “Caught, Mr. Solo!” Adams yelled. “Give up now. Be sensible.”

In answer, Solo leveled his gun and opened fire, aware of the comforting sound of Illya’s gun beside him. Louie and the giant ducked behind the Cadillac, and orange spit out over the hood as they returned the lead, round for round. Solo kept up the barrage, pinning them down, fishing in his pocket for another clip.

The scene was straight out of a nightmare. The three cars jammed in upon each other, their head-lamps blasting bright beams of light. The gunshots hammered and echoed off the buildings, a cannon roar, and the smell of the explosions was biting to the nose. But it was as Solo wanted it. He and Illya could fire at their discretion. Their attackers had to be careful, or in firing across, they would hit each other.

Julius bobbed up and down, firing and withdrawing, firing and withdrawing. Solo went to one knee to get a steadier aim. From somewhere close, between shots, he heard the slap of running feet. The man from Point Eight? He fervently hoped so. Because he was effectively boxed. When the ammunition was gone - he thrust the thought away and aimed for the giant’s head. But the giant, stupid as he looked, had some uncanny knack of ducking just as Solo’s finger made the caress on the trigger. No bullet struck home.

The street-side door of the U.N.C.L.E. car jerked open and Solo twisted in time to see Louie’s livid face above a gun that spat fire. Beside him, Illya gasped in surprise and impact and fell sideways against Solo’s gun hand, throwing off his lone shot at Louie. The door slammed and Louie was gone.

Solo held his fire for a long moment, and the street was eerily quiet. Illya’s weight was against his back, and his guttural, “All right, Illya was answered only with a conglomerate mumble and groan.

Adams yelled again, taking heart from the cease-fire. “**B**ack is to the wall, Solo - literally. Do you want to die on the street? Your friend, too?”

Solo turned half around and attempted a shot at Robard, who stood with the old man by the Chevy. His gun clicked empty. A wave of draining blood washed the strength out of him as he realized his pocket was empty of clips,

too. Illya lay against him, stirring, sense returning to his open eyes. But there was blood dribbling down his left hand from under his sleeve.

The moment of hesitation finished the battle that was already lost. The car door that sheltered Solo was slammed against him from the front, toppling him on Illya. Louie and the giant squeezed through to stand over him. Solo raised himself to his feet in smarting fury and humiliation and tossed his gun down. Then he knelt beside Illya.

“Run, Napoleon!” Illya straightened. “I’m only scratched.”

Solo quickly inspected the source of the blood. It was just a flesh wound, but his friend’s blood was spewing out, staining the street.

“Napoleon!” Illya commanded, “Run!”

Adams said from close by, “There is nowhere to run.”

Solo looked up. He was surrounded. The old man and Robard had squeezed by the back door of the car and now he and Illya were in the center of four men. Four guns pointed down at his head, and he felt the lethal load of the barrels deep in his nervous system. Suppressing a shudder, he said to Illya, “The man’s right, isn’t he? Nowhere to run at all.” He fought to keep dread out of his voice. Illya was incapable of helping for the time being. This had to be played out by ear. But where was the agent from Point Eight?

Illya pushed himself to a sitting position and then to his knees, ignoring the blood that covered his hand in rivulets. His blue eyes were staring in recognition and disdain at the giant man with the gun in his gnarled hand. “Ah,” Illya said. “The great ape who doesn’t know how to drive.”

The giant’s big foot with the huge shoe came streaking out. It caught Illya viciously in the ribs, forcing his breath out in a painful gasp and toppling him again.

Solo reached for the giant Julius, his face black with anger, but before he could get purchase enough to stand, Louie and Robard pushed him down by the shoulders. He went to his knees hard on the cement. The guns came in to touch his head, three of them still warm from firing.

Illya struggled up, rubbing his side. He said softly, “Never insult a Neanderthal, Napoleon. Remember that when you’re in his keeping.” His blue eyes met Solo’s intently, trying to convey something. Solo knew what it was. Illya was apologizing for failing, and asking how they might try to escape.

Adams’ triumphant voice cut between them. “Take him! Now!”

Robard and Louie yanked Solo roughly to his feet. He staggered upward, searching for a route of action, but Robard had already produced a pair of handcuffs with a short chain between them, and from behind him Louie jerked his hands forward so Robard could clamp them on. The click of the steel lock ended it, and Solo knew it. Whatever had been planned for this night was now finished. He was good bait, all right. And he had been swallowed by the fish he had set out to catch.

The fight went out of him in a deep rush of breath as his body gave way to unused adrenalin, shaking. He drew another breath to still the trembling. Yet he wasn't ashamed of it because he had learned and accepted long ago that the body's physical reactions had nothing to do with courage. The body might shake and tremble, might give way altogether, but the man inside that body would still fight.

The old man was giving orders again. "Go through Solo's pockets and throw away everything you find. Communicator, wallet, even his cigarette lighter. Everything. They may have a tracing device planted on him."

Heavy hands started searching him, and from Illya's face Solo knew that the careful Russian had, indeed, planted a tracer on him sometime during the evening. It was pulled out from beneath his lapel and thrown into the gutter. Illya shook his head in defeat.

"Now," Adams said, "get rid of Kuryakin as I told you."

"Why?" Robard asked. "You'll only have to catch him again."

"Then I'll catch him," Adams said. "I want this done properly." He swung on Illya. "Remember, Kuryakin, there's a coffin waiting for you, too, if you stay in your present occupation. Now - get yourself out of here!"

Illya was dragged to his feet and let loose, but he stayed there, holding his arm. Solo knew it was beginning to hurt him as the first shock of the wound wore off. But Illya stood where he was, his gaze intent, asking for a signal to start some action, any action.

Adams shouted, "Louie - set him dancing."

Louie raised his gun and fired at Illya's feet. Illya held his ground for three shots, then moved as the fourth spewed cement dust onto his shoes. He retreated only two steps and stopped, his mouth set, his blue eyes under the ragged hair frantically signaling Solo.

Louie fired again and Solo longed to turn away. He didn't want to watch Illya's pitiful withdrawal. But Illya wouldn't withdraw. His stare still burned into Solo's.

Solo lifted his manacled hands and shrugged. “Go on, Illya. This is my party, now.”

The bullets played at Illya’s feet. “But, Napoleon -”

“Go on!” Solo shouted. “This guy’s marksmanship isn’t all that good. He’ll hit you any minute.”

Illya backed across the sidewalk and off the curb, every move reluctant. He finally surrendered and ran with a limping, offbalance run, favoring his bleeding arm. He turned the first corner, and Solo was alone in the street with the four men.

Adams was confident now that he had gotten his way. “Put Mr. Solo in the car,” he ordered, “and we’ll be on our way. Waverly may decide to honor us, and I’m not ready to see him. I have what I want.” His eyes came up to meet Solo’s and they were like marbles, hard and cold.

The contact was broken by a shove from Julius’ big hand, and Solo was pushed into the Cadillac. There was nothing he could do about it so he let them have their triumph with their shoving and manhandling. He settled himself in the seat, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. He was suddenly exhausted. And surprised that he wasn’t dead. If this old man’s mission in life was to kill him, why hadn’t he simply pointed a gun and had it done?

Chapter 6

“Most Accidents Occur at Home”

SOLO ESTIMATED the drive at an hour, going the speed limit. He had no watch to check, but he had his senses. They had left the city and gone into the dark country side, turning off the highway onto blacktopped roads. They finally stopped at a farm. It was abandoned, the lawn full of coarse, tall grass. A big farmhouse teetered on its foundation two hundred feet from the road, and they pulled in behind it. As Solo was dragged out of the car, he saw a blazing sky of stars. There was no moon.

The entire ride had been silent. Adams had sat on one side of him and Julius on the other, holding his arm tightly. They obviously thought he was still dangerous and the idea comforted him. He couldn’t lose all of his dignity when the men who had him chained were wary of him.

They pulled him along to the rear of the house and pushed him up the rickety steps into a shed-like room that leaned precariously on the back of the kitchen. Mud-room, maybe, he thought. A place for dirty boots, chore clothes, mops and brooms.

Adams spoke. “Please watch this next operation care fully, Mr. Solo.”

He was forced to stand watching as Julius leaned over and with a great plank levered the rickety steps out of place. Under the steps was a gaping hole.

“It goes down thirty feet,” Adams told him. “Straight down. We dug it especially.”

Solo refused to give the old man the satisfaction of asking why he had dug the hole. He was curious. But that answer would come later. If it was to be his grave, he would just as soon not know beforehand.

They brought him away from the pit and into the kitchen. The room was bare and austere from disuse. Large, as country kitchens once had been, it held a huge wooden table, six straight chairs, and a sideboard. The china cupboard showed glass that was too dirty to see through, and the windows

were hung with grimy brown rags that had been white curtains once, but had been methodically devoured by the sunshine.

There was one overhead light and it cast harsh shadows upon them. Adams pulled out one of the straight chairs, placing it four feet from the table. He motioned that this was where he wanted Solo. As Solo was led to it, he took in the rest of the scene. Dirty sink, blackened old-fashioned stove, and pantry cupboards. The thing that interested him most - the door to the rest of the house - was closed.

Robard shoved him into the chair. Then Robard was leaning close, whispering into his ear, his breath reeking with onion. “You should have let Louie and me kill you the first time, buddy. I hate to see you in the Professor’s hands. He’s crazy, you know.”

Solo smiled a sickly smile to cover the swallowing of the lump in his throat. He clasped his chained hands together in his lap and sat straight, easing his back.

Adams summoned Robard away. “Get busy, Robard. Put the finishing touches on it.”

Robard, onion breath and all, trudged across the room obediently and picked up a wooden tool kit containing hammers of various sizes, nails, and screws. He continued in his steady pace to the closed door and opened it, passing through into the rest of the house too quickly for Solo to get a glimpse inside.

Solo brought his attention back to the kitchen. There was nothing for him to do but wait. He doubted if there was even any sense in hoping any more. Julius, more ugly than ever with the overhead light casting cliffs and chasms of shadow on his face, still had his gun in his hand. So did Louie.

Adams’ step was lively and cocky. Behind his glasses, his eyes sparked. “And now for Waverly’s little lamb.”

“I’ve been called a lot of things, but never a lamb,” Solo said, relieved to find his voice clear and steady.

“A pure misnomer.” Adams was suddenly towering over him, face white and splotched with red. “You’re no more pure than your Thrush counterparts! No better than they are!”

“I hope I am,” Solo answered. “I think I’ve proved out so far - toe to toe.”

“This is no game, Mr. Solo,” Adams hissed at him. “This is the black edge of death you’re facing.”

To hide the fact that he couldn’t quite manage another smile, Solo said, “You make it sound very dramatic, but I’ve been there before, too.”

“Ahh.” Adams was gleeful. “Bravado! You see, Louie? Just as I told you. Corner a killer and it shows its teeth. I would have been disappointed, Solo, if you hadn’t given me this little interlude.”

But Solo was disappointed that he’d been forced to give it. He was frightened. Every part of his body was tensed and ready to explode into fight, yet all he could do was sit here and pretend it didn’t matter. He turned the talk. At least he could get some facts. “Just who and what are you?” he demanded.

“My name is Adams. Doctor Abel Adams.”

The name registered with a sinking feeling in Solo’s stomach. “Abel Adams! My Uncle Abel. The man with all the charms - coffins, dollar signs, and boat trip souvenirs.” A spy in the organization, Mr. Waverly had said. But, Mada Adams? The girl afraid of her own job?

“Only the coffin is of interest to you, Mr. Solo.”

“Doctor of what?” Solo asked.

“I’ve spent my life studying the flora of the world. Plants. Grain. Growing areas. Patterns of vegetation.”

“A gentle vocation for such a violent man.”

“I’m no ordinary man. I have a mission, Mr. Solo. And the man with a mission always wins. You can see how well I planned. Not all of U.N.C.L.E.‘s resources could save you from me.”

“You had the help of a viper,” Solo spat.

“Inside your Headquarters. Of course! I couldn’t have done it otherwise. The point is, I was intelligent enough to know it. Now ask me what my mission is. I’m a killer of killers. A highly honorable thing, don’t you think?”

The sound of hammering from behind the closed door interrupted Adams’ tirade. For a change, the old man didn’t mind. He smiled.

“What’s your man doing in there?” Solo asked. “Building a gallows?”

“Nothing so simple. You’ll know soon enough. Don’t wish your life away when you have so little left.”

–

In the next room, Robard went about his work methodically, spending no time with qualms or conscience. The room was actually two, dining and

living, joined together in a large el shape. He had only put two dim lights on because he didn't like to see the results of his hammering.

He'd been working on the setup, supervised by the Professor, for a full day. It was nearly ready. The two rooms were a shambles. All the furniture had been pulled away from the wall and placed in various spots on the floor. There they rested in weird positions. Ottomans tilted on their sides. Chairs were upside down. Extra furniture had been brought down from the upper floor - bedside tables, bookcases - and added to the congestion. It was a long obstacle course of furniture that spread out behind him in the dark light, making it impossible to walk a straight line from the kitchen to the front door. Even a carefully maneuvered zigzagging line was dangerous because all the scattered furniture gleamed with the shine of steel.

With his hammer, Robard had attached weapons to the pieces. Knives, kitchen forks, barbecue spits, shish kabob skewers, scissors - anything that Adams could think of to stab a man walking by. And all wooden handled so they could be nailed on the solid old frames with the blades and points sticking out to scrape and mangle passing legs.

On a higher level, there were knife blades waiting on the sides of cabinets, on the door jambs. They stuck out at chest height from a bookcase, at stomach height from the battered piano that would never play a sweet note again. Robard inched gingerly among them, shaking his head, knowing the idea was insane, but also knowing it would work. The old man might be crazy, but he was canny.

He straightened up, giving the last knife a final hammering home, and shivered as he gazed down the length of the room to the door, set slightly off to the right at the front of the house. "Butchering time at the farm," went through his mind. Maybe Adams was right. A gunman he might be, but he wasn't the type of killer who could ever enjoy this kind of thing. The rooms bristled with steel. The horsehair sofa was a comfortable resting place no longer. Brushing against it would mean drawing blood.

Robard picked up his tool case and turned his back on the sight of his handywork. Better to get it done. Then maybe he could forget it.

–

Illya Kuryakin stood in Waverly's office, still holding his wounded arm. He had hastily wrapped a cloth around his hand so the blood wasn't dripping on the floor, but he was a shaft of anxiety as he waited for the head

man of U.N.C.L.E. to issue some order - any order - that would release him to search for Napoleon.

Waverly paced back and forth, explaining the foul-up, as though fixing details in his mind would lead to a solution. Illya waited through it because Waverly usually did come up with a solution.

Waverly said, “They took Archer out at Point Eight and we didn’t know it. That’s why you had no help.”

“I understand that, sir. But” - he could wait no longer - “I’m not concerned with the mechanics of the thing. Only with the fact that they have Napoleon. And we have no tracing device on him. They threw it away.”

Waverly faced him squarely. “Settle down, Mr. Kuryakin. Emotionalism can’t help us. I’ve put the entire building on emergency duty. All of our facilities are operating. We’ll find him.”

“Dead,” Illya said.

Waverly wasn’t surprised at the pessimism. He had come to expect fits of gloom from the Russian. He said, to jolt Kuryakin out of it, “Perhaps you and Mr. Solo have worked together too long. You’ve become involved on more than a professional basis.”

Illya sighed, taking command of himself. “I was his bodyguard. I should have -” He shrugged, ignoring the pain in his shoulder and arm, and reached across to the intercom. “I have one lead anyway. Confirmed tonight.” He thumbed a stud on the intercom.

A young woman’s voice answered, “Yes, sir.”

“This is Illya Kuryakin. I gave you a license yesterday. Did you get it checked through?”

“But you said it wasn’t priority.”

“Check it now - immediately,” Illya commanded, and thumbed the switch off. He swung to Waverly. “We know two of the men. Ordinary hoodlums. I could draw pictures all night of the old man and we might never find him. But that giant - I got his license number when he tried to run me down.”

“It shouldn’t take long to trace it. Sit down, for heaven’s sake, Mr. Kuryakin. You make me frightfully nervous standing there bleeding.”

Illya sat, but the intercom beeped and he jumped up again.

Waverly beat him to it, flicking the switch.

“Illya?” the young woman asked.

“Mr. Waverly here. Give me your report.”

“Oh - Mr. Waverly. The report was in on the number after all. The car belongs to a Doctor Abel Adams, botanist He has a shabby address.”

“Anything else on him?” Waverly asked.

“I’ve started a check, sir, and there is indication coming through that he is connected with Thrush. In an obscure way.”

Waverly glanced up at Illya. “A botanist. Plants.” He spoke to the intercom again. “Is he connected in any remote way with anyone in our organization?”

“No, sir.

“Just the same, get a check on every Adams employed by us.” Waverly flicked off the machine. “He is connected with us, you can rely on that.” He hit another switch. “Enforcement? I want agents Carr and Lansing to check out the address of Doctor Abel Adams immediately. Pick up the details from the Computer Room.” He shut the machine off. “Adams won’t be there of course.”

“Of course.” Illya resumed his seat. “He’s been too careful. I was fortunate to get his license. He’ll do some thing dramatic. From the way he spoke out there in the street, he likes the grand gesture, the display of melodrama.” Illya dropped his chin into his right palm, mumbling to himself. Adams. Abel Adams.” He straightened quickly. “My Uncle Abel!”

“What is it?” Waverly spoke swiftly so as not to interrupt his agent’s train of thought.

“Mada Adams? But - it couldn’t be. Just coincidence.”

“Spell out the coincidence, please.”

Illya told Mr. Waverly about Mada’s charm bracelet and the brief conversation when she had mentioned her Uncle Abel. Waverly voiced Illya’s own doubts. “Our pre-hiring security investigation would have turned up that relationship. She never would have been accepted.”

“But it has to be, sir.” Illya was eager. “There can’t be two men named Abel Adams.” He thrust himself out of his chair. “I’ll go get her.”

“Mr. Kuryakin.” Waverly commanded. “You’ll go straight along and have your arm tended. I’ll send for Miss Adams.”

Illya hesitated, vacillating back and forth. “But - “

“Your arm, Mr. Kuryakin. And change your jacket. I don’t like my men in here with bullet holes in their clothing.”

“Yes, sir, but I’ll be right back. Don’t let her get away from us. No wonder she’s so afraid of Enforcement Agents!”

–

The tableau in the kitchen was the same when Robard returned as it had been when he left. Solo watched him enter with his little tool box, desperately wishing that things would begin to move. Waiting was always the worst of everything. Yet he had to stall. If there was any chance, he had to give it time.

Adams stepped forward. “We’re ready then, Robard?”

“All set.”

Good boy.” Adams patted him on the back, then drew himself up tall, puffing out his chest like some courting bird. “You’ve been elusive, Mr. Solo. More than you should have been.”

“I would have come sooner if I’d known you had a great mission in mind. But you still haven’t told me why. Aside from the obvious fact that somewhere among your plants and vegetation areas you lost your balance.”

“My reasons are entirely personal.” Adams didn’t take the baited insult. “Years of degradation that finally led to revelation. I worked for Thrush, you see, never using my full talents. I was a research lackey. Me! I did them great service, but they treated me shabbily. Anyway, in my spare time I devoured books on psychology and philosophy - good and evil.”

“And you chose evil,” Solo said.

“No!” This time the bait was taken. Adams advanced on Solo, infuriated. His bony hands came out and grabbed Solo by the lapels. His right hand let go and made a nasty fist.

As the fist drew back to slam into his face, Solo shot his own manacled hands up to shield himself, rising slightly from the chair. The movement was defeated by Julius, who arrowed in behind him and pushed him down by the shoulders.

Adams still held him by one lapel, but the fist didn’t strike. “I chose good, Solo. Good.” Now his left hand too fell away from Solo, and he said in a lower voice, “I know you think I’m crazy, but I’m not. All of this is just one part of a plan. A plan you’ll never be allowed to know.” His rage was gone as quickly as it had come. “I finished my last work for Thrush a few weeks ago. Bits and pieces. They couldn’t operate without me, but they wouldn’t tell me what I was really doing, to what purpose my work might be put. They made a terrible mistake. Then they compounded it by laughing

at me, setting me a fool's task. But I've gone them one better. My first goal now is to destroy you."

Solo replaced his hands in his lap, wishing Julius wouldn't stand so close behind him. "You have your logic backwards, Adams. If you've chosen to destroy evil, Thrush should be your target."

"Hypocrisy must go down first. Thrush is what it is and pretends to be nothing else. Evil, yes. But in the open. Whereas your killers masquerade as saviors of the world. U.N.C.L.E.! Hypocrites, all of you. How many men have you killed or maimed, Solo?"

Solo didn't even grace that question with an answer. Not that Adams expected it. He was off again in his own reveries.

"A man like me," Adams said, "wasted on bits and pieces. A scientist like me - Abel C. Adams!"

"C?" Solo asked.

"The C stands for Cain. So I am a man of many facets. You can find every sin in my name. I haven't lived up to my second name yet. I've never killed a man."

"Until now," Solo finished for him.

"Not really even now. You are a killer, Mr. Solo, and I would never dispose of a killer with my own hands. A killer's death must be more subtle."

"Death is never subtle, Adams."

Adams smiled, his teeth startlingly white against his reddened skin. "This is beautiful, Solo, and if you listen you'll appreciate it. These men here" - he gestured to his hired assassins - "can never appreciate it. That's the pity. But Thrush will, and you will."

Adams stood tall again, as though pronouncing some great truth. "In order to have justice done, you must be the agent of your own destruction. It requires a Solo to kill a Solo."

Solo blinked slowly, absorbing the statement and drawing a blank. He rubbed his hands, dispersing the perspiration that appeared every time Adams approached with his madness. "You're not asking me to hold my breath, I hope, because I won't do it."

Again Adams didn't pay attention. But Solo was gaining time. He hoped it was time for his rescue and not just more time to be kept in suspense.

Adams was lecturing. “A mad killer animal can be disposed of in only one way that will provide justice. A trap! You know how that works, Mr. Solo. Trapped, the killer chews off its own leg in a frenzy to be free, and in so doing it kills itself by bleeding to death. That is justice. Blood for blood. And that you will do.”

Solo raised his hands and pulled at the manacles in the slim hope that they might be loose. They weren’t. “I’m afraid I don’t have the teeth for it,” he said, covering his movements.

“But I have! And quit wiggling about. You won’t get away from me.” He became a sudden flurry of command. “Robard! Fasten his hands as I showed you. Louie! Get the black cloth.”

As Julius reached under Solo’s arms and dragged him to his feet, Solo consciously stiffened his maddeningly jellied legs. This was it. It was coming at him fast and he didn’t know what it was. Tiny rivulets of sweat drenched his back as a wave of heat headed out of his stomach to spread up and down his muscles. He drew in a deep breath. Oxygen. Strength, he hoped.

Robard came at him with a rope, then stepped be hind him. Julius came around in front and, grabbing Solo just above the wrists, held his hands at waist level to allow Robard to do whatever it was he planned to do. The rope was put through behind Solo’s elbows and pulled taut, holding his elbows together nastily from behind. Yet they weren’t bent backward. They rested evenly at his waist. He couldn’t even guess the strategy behind it.

A hand came over his head and the rope dropped around his neck in a loop. Robard pulled on it and Solo’s head jerked back as the hemp cut into the skin of his throat. He felt a knot being made on the rope between his elbows. Then Robard was through. Julius released him.

“Ingenious, isn’t it?” Adams asked. “That elaborate tie will give you a limited use of your hands. You can hold them out in front of you and use your fingers to feel so you will have a chance. But you can’t lift your arms high enough, or lower your head enough to rip this off.” He hushed and brought out a strip of black cloth, narrow and thick. He waved it about like a banner. “The blindfold! The most essential part of my trap.”

With the cloth dangling before his eyes, Solo raised his hands in a test of Adams’ rope. The loop about his throat tightened and he coughed, immediately raising his head and lowering his hands to get his breath.

Adams was right. He was helpless. There was no way he could ever get the blindfold off once it was in place.

“Well done,” Solo admitted when the coughing spasm allowed him to talk.

“Don’t lay it to the cleverness of insanity, Mr. Solo,” Adams said. “I’m not insane. Now for the rest. You’ll find the next rooms of the house are a giant booby trap - all simple, ordinary things, but lethal. Your goal is simple. The front door. If you can get out, you’ll have your life. I don’t think you can get out. And don’t try the back door. You saw the pit there.”

Solo sighed a shaky sigh. “Your mission in life is to kill killers, but you want to play with me a little first. The only trouble with your reasoning is, I’m not going to move.” Solo’s voice vented his anger and he let it come. He needed any emotion he could muster that would help him dispel the helpless fear that hovered in him. “If you’re going to kill me, then kill me. I won’t perform for you.”

“Outguessed again.” Adams smiled, close to his face. Solo couldn’t even turn away because of the rope about his neck. “You will move. A man like you will never watch his life ebbing away without attempting to save it. You see, we’re leaving you here alone. You’re free to escape if you can. If you prefer to stand in one spot until you fall from exhaustion and die of thirst, that’s your decision. I’m betting you’ll move.”

The knuckly hands straightened out the blindfold, narrow and black, then darted forward and clamped it over Solo’s eyes. The kitchen went black for him. Totally black. Now he was both eyeless and armless - a third of a man.

Adams tied a tight knot at the back of Solo’s head, and chuckled. “Tell me if you can see.”

“Are you kidding?” Solo spat.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve tested this particular piece of cloth in the bright sun and I know it’s foolproof.”

Julius’ deep hollow voice filled the kitchen. “You want me to spin him around, Professor?”

“This isn’t a child’s game, Julius. Forgive him, Mr. Solo. He simply hasn’t the capacity to understand.”

Hands were on Solo’s shoulders and he knew they belonged to Adams. He quickly estimated what a solid kick backwards might do, then gave up

the idea. They would all leap at him and he'd wind up in worse condition than he was already.

Adams spoke again, his voice confidential. "There's only one point left, Mr. Solo. You will die eventually. Understand that. It's the only possible outcome for you. But the duration of your ordeal is open to discussion. You are Chief Enforcement Agent of U.N.C.L.E., are you not?"

Solo said out of his enforced blindness, "Didn't Mada tell you?"

"She told me. I want to make you an offer. As Chief Enforcement Agent, you must know all of the U.N.C.L.E. agents. And more important, you know their personal habits. Tell me what you know. Give me names, descriptions, and ideas of where they're likely to be found when they're off duty."

"In exchange for what?" Solo asked.

"A quick death."

Solo didn't waver for a second. He didn't know what was facing him, but he wasn't about to betray his friends, to set them up for ambush at restaurants, nightclubs, or their homes. This was the crux of Adams' plan. Names and places. "Uh-uh," Solo said.

"I must have those names!" Adams shouted close to his ear. "I have declared war on U.N.C.L.E. I'm going to prove that I, alone, can do what Thrush hasn't been able to do. Dundee may smirk at me now, but wait until he sees how I have destroyed U.N.C.L.E. single-handed."

Solo laughed a short, quick chuckle, clutching at the name, Dundee. So, it was all of one piece. And with Adams involved, the "chemical - plant" that had baffled them must mean vegetation.

"Don't laugh," Adams shouted again. "My war is going well. I've won the first battle."

Solo felt the rope about his throat, about his elbows, and the manacles on his wrists. "So you have."

"And you, Mr. Solo, are going to die. I want your death and I want those names. I say you can't endure what I have planned. No man can because I've plotted it both physically and psychologically. You'll give me the names before you die. I'll be back to check on you and you'll talk. Or - *you'll be too insane to make sense*. This I can promise."

"You've already had my answer. Let's get on with it."

Adams again placed his hands on Solo's shoulders and turned him about with a grunt of disgust, aiming him, then holding him steady. Solo heard the

door that had remained closed being opened. “Mr. Solo,” Adams said, “the door into the main part of the house is directly in front of you. Through it you’ll find a large dining room and a larger parlor. The front door is to the right at the end of the parlor. Life is that way. Try for it.”

The hands left Solo’s shoulders and he fought to balance himself in the dark. As his body signaled it was standing straight, he heard the clumping of feet leaving him, picking out Julius’ oversized thump easily. Adams’ voice came from in front of him, a few feet away. “Walk a straight line, Mr. Solo, and don’t get turned about. Household accidents are wicked things. They can actually kill a man. Goodbye.”

The feet moved again and there was a strange shuffling sound as though they were edging sideways through the door. They retreated further, another door opened, feet moved, and the other door closed. Everything was deathly quiet.

Solo stood still, wanting even the sound of his breathing to stop so he might hear the noises of the house. But his breathing came deep and harsh, the breathing of fear. There wasn’t anything to hear anyway. He was alone inside an unknown booby-trap, tied and blindfolded.

He thought for quick dark moments of trying the back door in spite of the pit, but knew instinctively that Adams would have locked it against that chance. Then his mind played fleetingly with the idea of simply waiting until Adams tired of the game and tried some thing else. That wouldn’t do, either. He had to get the information back to Mr. Waverly that his hope had been answered and it was a lunatic with an assassination scheme and not a new Thrush policy. He had to get that information out before the conscientious old man curtailed part of U.N.C.L.E.‘s operations in the face of a Thrush plot that didn’t exist.

He forced his numb legs to move forward, feeling with his right toe. There was nothing in the way. But he was hesitant to take a step in the black dark. He took it. Nothing happened. He brought his left foot forward carefully and took another step. Still nothing happened. He moved a little more boldly, estimating the distance to the dining room door. He thought he must be there.

A slight difference in the silent pressure on his ears told him he was. He swung his right foot and found solid wood. Bringing it back to the left, he found empty space. It was the door, then. He was ready to tackle it.

His groping fingers touched wood. He was headed into the door jamb on the right. He pressed ahead, felt the wood with his fingers - and then felt something else. A sharpness met his hands. He felt along it carefully, recognizing it. A knife. It was solidly fastened to the right door jamb. He smiled to himself in the dark. One obstacle met and conquered. He stepped into the door way, moving to the left to avoid the knife, centered himself - and was attacked from the left.

A startled cry escaped from him as the knife blade attached at the left sank its razor edge through his coat, his shirt, and two inches into his left arm. He was caught on the damned thing. He had to get off. If he went to the right, the other knife would stab him.

Painfully angling his body, he avoided the first knife, feeling it slide harmlessly along his right sleeve. Then he jerked straight away from the one in his left arm and came loose from it. Warm moisture followed in the wake of the steel, but he knew it wasn’t too bad. He hoped it wasn’t too bad. If it had hit an artery, the whole ordeal would soon be over, so there was no sense in worrying about it.

He halted to gather his courage and his strength. What else was facing him in the blackness, he didn’t know, and wasn’t in any hurry to discover.

Chapter 7

“A Do-It-Yourself Murder Scene”

ILLYA KURYAKIN stood at the far side of the round table, Mr. Waverly beside him, and stared across at the cowering figure of Mada Adams. She stayed glued to her chair, shaking, her face cascaded by trails of tears. Illya felt no compassion for her. His own arm was in a sling, the pain annulled by local anesthetic, the bullet wound closed. But Napoleon was out in the dark somewhere, partly because of this woman. She had to be forced to tell them where. They had already spent forty-five minutes on her interrogation and they had gotten nowhere.

Mada looked at Illya, a new tear following the others down her cheek. “You’re frightening me! I know what you do up here. Don’t you dare touch me!”

Illya made his voice low and cold. “If you know what we do up here, then tell us what we have to know before we start on you.”

He caught Mr. Waverly’s frown. The older man didn’t like such threats; he never allowed them to pass. But this time even he kept silent.

“I can’t tell you!” Mada cried. “I can’t inform on my own uncle. Not after all he’s done for me.” Her head bobbed back and forth from Illya to Waverly, frantically searching for some sign of tenderness. “He never told me anything, anyway. He suggested that I take a job here, yes. He also told me not to mention his name on my application.”

“And when the security investigation was made on you, he was conveniently out of town, I understand,” Waverly said.

“That’s right. There was nothing to link us together. He’s just a distant relative, not a real uncle at all. We seldom saw each other. It was mostly phone calls and letters - and a lawyer handled all the money he gave me for my education.”

“Don’t play the innocent,” Illya badgered her, keeping her going, keeping the tears streaming. “You knew he worked for Thrush. You passed him information.”

“Only little pieces. And not for Thrush., either. I didn’t see what it would hurt. An address - a routine assignment - the grapevine knew all those things. They weren’t classified.”

“But you go along with his plan to murder Napoleon!”

“Stop saying that, Illya! There’s no murder involved. You wouldn’t even have me up here, abusing me, if I hadn’t made that one slip. I only mentioned my Uncle Abel once, but you remembered it. You have a nasty, clutching mind.”

Mr. Waverly stepped in since she had rallied enough to put Illya on the defensive and take the offensive for herself. Illya watched his Chief’s tactics carefully. The old fox was switching from browbeating to a gentle appeal to her conscience, trying to bring her back to the emotional state, to break her down. “Tell me, Miss Adams, what did Mr. Solo do to make you hate him so much?”

“I don’t hate him,” she countered. “In fact… he wasn’t at all what Uncle Abel said he would be. But my uncle wouldn’t harm anyone. I know that!”

She was back on the defensive, but Illya chafed under the slow passage of time. Right now he almost wished he wasn’t an U.N.C.L.E. agent, that he could hit her, could force the confession out of her. He tried the only thing he could do. Still pretending some terrible threat, he said, “One warning, Mada. You haven’t time to weigh pros and cons here. You have just enough time to talk. Do it! Because if your Uncle Abel wouldn’t harm any one, then what was that red stuff I dripped all over the street getting back here? What is this sling I’m wearing?”

She was terrified, but still too stubborn to speak. She gasped, “Now are you going to hit me?”

Illya swung from her in total disgust. He said to Mr. Waverly, “She’s abnormally afraid of everyone in Section Two, sir. Her uncle brainwashed her.”

Waverly stepped away from the table, motioning his agent to follow. Waverly spoke in a whisper. “I think she’s just about ready to speak in spite of herself. What do you say?”

“From the symptoms, yes, sir. Do we have time to push her over the line?”

Waverly made the decision with a quick shake of his head. “No. It may take another half hour. Yet I can’t use drugs on the chance we need her to lead us to Mr. Solo. We’ll have to try a bluff.” Without explanation, he

faced Mada again and said loudly, “All right, Mr. Kuryakin, get the hypodermic. And make it a goodly-sized dose. We can’t worry about side effects now.”

Mada clutched the arms of her chair. “Hypodermic? What -”

Illya headed for the door with long strides, waiting for her call to halt. Before her call came, and before he reached the door, it whooshed open on its own and a frantic figure ran into the room. Lainy Michaels. She pushed by Illya, almost knocking him down.

Lainy took a stance halfway to the table, panting from exertion. “I heard you’d found someone who knows where Napoleon is. Is this the one?”

Mr. Waverly was taken off guard. All he could muster was, “Miss Michaels - if you please! You have no business here.”

Mada stared hard at Lainy, her own mouth set. Mada said, “No, you mustn’t stay around to see the torture.”

Lainy’s body lost some of its stiffness. “Torture? Don’t be ridiculous. These men would never - you wouldn’t, would you?” She swung to Illya. “Would you?”

Illya only said, “You d better leave.”

Lainy didn’t move. Instead, she zeroed in on Mada. “If she knows where Napoleon is and won’t tell, then I’ll pull out her fingernails, myself!” She broke from her spot in the middle of the room and ran to Mada, grabbing the other woman by the shoulders. “Do you know? Do - you - know?”

Illya covered the distance quickly and with his one good arm clutched at Lainy. “Please. This is none of your affair.”

Mr. Waverly watched the action with an intent stare, letting it play out to its own end.

Lainy slapped Illya’s hand aside and still grasping Math’s shoulders, started to shake her. Mada s head jerked back and forth, her neck limp. “Now, tell!” Lainy shouted into her face. “Tell! Maybe *they* won’t touch you, but I will! Where is Napoleon?”

Mada fought, but couldn’t rally the strength to push her away. “Leave me alone! No one is going to hurt Napoleon. You all think in terms of killing so you believe everyone is a killer.”

Lainy let Math go, bending over her, her breath pulsing onto Math’s face. “But they are going to hurt him! Don’t you understand that? They’re going to kill him! I saw them attempt it once. With my own eyes.”

Mada became suddenly still, unbelieving. “*You* saw? And you don’t work for U.N.C.L.E.?” She was vacillating, tying to make the decision.

Lainy stayed close, face to face, and there were tears on Lainy’s cheeks, too. “Please! Whoever you are - please!”

Mada made up her mind. It seemed to Illya that he could almost see the decision form. “All right,” she said. “Get away from me. I’ll tell everything I know. But get away!”

This time, when Illya touched Lainy’s arm, she stepped away from her astonished victim. “Hurry, Mada,” Illya said.

“If my Uncle Abel isn’t at his apartment, then he has to be at the old farmhouse he leased a few weeks ago. It’s out in the country on a deserted side road. I saw it once. He said we could settle there if things worked out, and make it nice, and live there. But -” She clapped her hands to her head as though trying to clear it. “I don’t know if I can explain how to get there! I’m not good at maps and things.”

Waverly’s voice entered calmly. “Can you point the way?”

Math sighed and nodded yes, resigned to the ultimate betrayal.

Waverly was all tense action beneath his tweed suit. “Mr. Kuryakin, order an assault team. Meet us in the garage as soon as you can.”

Illya, new blood rushing through him, took off the sling and flung it on the table. “We’re already there, Mr. Waverly,” he said and sprinted for the door.

Alone and helpless in the blackness of the blindfold, Napoleon Solo edged away from the kitchen door and crept on into the dining room of the old house. “Through the dining room, through the parlor, and out the front door,” he told himself, making it a command. He inched along, a half-step at a time, using his feet to feel the way. He bumped into something, felt along it with his shoe, and sidestepped it. What was the shape of the room? Long and narrow? Square? He couldn’t know.

Another step, and he banged shakily into an over stuffed chair. There was an ache in him just to sit down and be finished with the whole thing. It was tempting. He sighed and continued on his way, wondering where the defeatist attitude had sprung from. He had never harbored it before. Adams was right. There was a special, unexpected terror in this business that clawed at his will and ate up his courage.

He felt along the edge of the chair until he could safely take a step. He took it and ran straight into some thing else that banged at his shin and

almost threw him down. As he struggled for balance in the dark, getting his feet under him, he moved unwittingly to the right and his right leg was bitten by a stiletto. It sank into his calf, and he froze.

He tried to bend and get his hands on the thing, but the rope about his throat caught him short in another spasm of coughing. He stood straight. He'd have to handle this one as he had the other. With a quick move to the left, he jerked his leg off the stiletto point and again felt blood following it out.

At least he knew what he was facing. There were things strewn in his path, things with blades and points on them. Adams had said he should bleed to death. But knives at arm and leg level weren't going to kill him. The terror lay in the thought that there might be some thing at face level, something to gouge his eyes, his throat. And he couldn't raise his hands high enough to protect himself against them.

He gulped in a deep breath and thrust his feet on.

Another two steps and another encounter. This was something low, like an ottoman, and this time the blade only cut his trouser leg, missing his skin. He walked on.

Solo tried to ignore the feel of blood dripping unseen on his arm and his leg, holding a new thought in his mind. If be could find a knife that was located high enough… He groped forward with his manacled hands, praying for such a knife.

Four steps more and he had one. It protruded from a bookcase, he could figure that much. And it was sharp on both edges. Carefully, slowly, he turned himself around, letting the blade run from his hands to his arm and then along his back so he wouldn't misplace it. With his back to it, he positioned himself, felt the blade tug the rope between his elbows, and began the painstaking sawing movement that would cut through the rope and give him the use of his eyes and hands. The motion choked off his air, but he coughed only once, then held his breath.

Out of the black dark around him came a lunatic shout, "Turn him! Turn him!" Adams screamed. "Don't let him free himself!"

There was noise in the room, feet and jumping bodies and the blast of a gun. A bullet whined beside Solo's head and wood splintered on him. Startled by the commotion, he jumped from the bullet impact, losing the knife blade, the rope still whole and tight about him. Another bullet

whizzed in, and despite his determination not to panic he recoiled in the dark, taking two running steps away from the bookcase.

His leg smashed against the ottoman he had side stepped moments before and he fell to his knees, a double sharpness stabbing his right thigh. He stayed where he was, impaled, gasping for air and control of himself. He jerked free of the double blades, held very still to test his balance, and lurched to his feet.

He said into the darkness, “So you’re still here after all, Adams. Enjoying the show?”

“Immensely,” Adams answered from his left. “But you have yet to draw enough blood to suit me.”

Solo smiled, and it was real this time. “Thank you for that information. I couldn’t tell how much I was bleeding.”

“And you had visions of arteries pulsing?” Adams laughed. “I shouldn’t have told you, should I? Ready to give me those names?”

Solo stood still, letting the silence return, attempting to reconstruct his flight in his darkened mind. He swiveled slightly one way and then the other. Which way was toward the front of the house? He bit his lip, cocking his head to listen for sounds or creakings that would orient him. At last he turned full around. He had retreated in his panic. He had to go forward.

His legs didn’t want to carry him. It was a tremendous effort of sheer will to make his feet move, especially now that he knew he had an audience to his agony. Yet the fact that they were watching pushed him on. He was fully aware of the reserves he had in his physical body. All he had to fight was the darkness and the terror.

He crept on as he had been doing, letting it form a pattern. Feel ahead with a foot, grope with the fingers, take the step. Feel ahead with a foot, grope with the fingers, take a step. He counted out forty steps that way, two more cuts in his clothing, and one more knife slice in his left calf, but he was gaining ground.

His hands, angling before him, ran into something solid. He felt it with his fingertips. This wasn’t a piece of furniture. This was a wall. The front wall? Hope welled inside him. Adams had said the door was to the right. He groped along the wallpapered plaster and ran into no more sharpnesses. His hands felt wood and a quick motion up and down told him it was a door! He grabbed quickly for the knob and found it, turning it frantically.

It was locked.

Adams laughed from far behind him. “I forgot to mention that part, Mr. Solo. I have the key. You’ll have to come and take it from me.”

Solo leaned his forehead against the cool wood of the door, choked on the rope at his throat, and straightened up again. There was a commotion inside his chest that he recognized with utter humiliation. His breath was threatening to come out in a sob. He couldn’t walk back the way he had come. It had taken everything in him to get to the door. He couldn’t search in this black death trap for Adams.

Adams’ voice came again, “Robard! Get him away from that door!”

More noise, and as he expected, another bullet slammed in close to his head. Solo stayed where he was. He would outlast them. He wouldn’t budge.

But the sound of the bullets triggered the reflexes he had struggled so hard to acquire and he turned instinctively to take shelter. He stumbled away from the door, bumping wildly into things, bruising his legs and thighs, cutting himself once more.

He fell. He righted himself enough to stay on his knees, but made no effort to rise. He didn’t have any idea of where he was in the room. Not even of which way he was facing.

“On your feet, Solo. Never say die. Isn’t that our credo?”

“I’m fine where I am, Adams, thank you,” he shouted back into the dark.

“Julius! Get him on his feet!”

Robard’s voice came through. “Let him be, Professor. Kill him and get it over with. You’ve proved your point. You can beat U.N.C.L.E. any time you want.”

Solo waited for the decision and the bullet that would arrow for his head if Robard had his way. But Adams answered, “Get him on his feet, Julius. You must keep on with this, Mr. Solo. You haven’t even begun to explore the possibilities of this room. We can continue here for hours. Unless you’re ready to give me the names.”

Heavy feet clumped toward Solo and Julius’ big hands hefted him under the armpits, setting him on his feet.

There was no possible way out of this, he knew that. He had few choices. He could struggle on until he died; he could stand still until he died. And they wouldn’t let him stand still.

Despair weighted him down and he was afraid of it. Despair was one emotion he'd never felt during all of his years with U.N.C.L.E. Now it clutched him tight and made him want little more than to end this weird business by finding a blade at the proper height and ramming it home through his chest. He began to stumble about the room, being less careful. He couldn't fight everybody, himself least of all.

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Illya Kuryakin, his wounded arm still numb from the anesthetic, slithered out of the U.N.C.L.E. wagon and took to the field beside the road. He was dressed in black from head to foot, his face smeared with charcoal to cut down the highlights of his fair skin, and his blond hair tucked under a black cap. His gun was in his hand, converted from the pistol to the U.N.C.L.E. automatic rifle.

He ran carefully, ducking down, jumping up to run again. The house was one hundred yards ahead yet, but he took no chances. Around him he could hear the faint twig-crackings as the men under his command - eight of them - moved parallel to him or streaked ahead to come up from the other side.

As the miles had slipped by under the wheels of the wagon, Mada had progressively fainted against Mr. Waverly, each mile making her disbelieve more and more that her Uncle Abel could be ruthless enough to kill Napoleon Solo. But Waverly, insisting on coming with the assault team, had held her up, quieted her tears, and gruffly forced her to show them .the way. After many false turns and dead ends, she had found the house.

Illya paused behind a tree. The rest of the space to the house was open lawn, but the grass was tall and would give some cover. His left shoulder rested against the tree trunk and it was a queer sensation not being able to feel it through the numbness. He checked his gun once more, unnecessarily. He was too eager for this attack and the pause was to force himself to calm down and follow proper procedure. His men were watching for his signal. It had to be right.

He scrambled away from the tree and sprinted for the house. It was old and tall, three stories high. Only the bottom floor was alight with lamps, and those were dim. Illya scuttled through the tall grass, then fell to his stomach to make the final approach. There didn't seem to be any guards outside. This Adams operation was certainly makeshift. Yet even with the amateurism, they had taken Napoleon. And killed him?

Illya crawled faster, angling for a side window. It promised the best light and he wouldn't need to g over the porch floorboards which were bound to creak. His breath came short and fast in the excitement and his hand clenched on the gun. He tried not to think ahead to what he might see when he peered through the window.

He stopped below it and inched upward until his eyes were above the sill and he could see inside. His throat tightened in astonishment. The room he saw was a shambles of furniture, and prickling from that shambles were icepicks, knives, hatchets - some of them stained a crimson color that made him shiver. There were no men visible.

He slipped to the other side of the window to get a longer view of the room. He saw them. The giant, Louie and Robard, and even Adams, crouching behind various pieces of furniture. Standing alone in the center of the floor, his arms tied in a strange pattern, was Napoleon. Blindfolded.

Illya's eyes took in the many rips and tears in Napoleon s gray suit, and the terrible stains of blood all over him. He was a pincushion!

Napoleon moved, and it was an unsteady, wobbly step he took. He was headed straight for an old piano that crouched at the side of the room, blades protruding from it at chest level. Illya envisioned him coming up against one of those blades, puncturing a lung, or his heart.

Dragging himself from the scene, Illya checked to the left and right for his men. He could see four of them in position. He raised his gun in signal, poising them for the first jump of attack.

"Now!" Illya screamed it loud enough to be heard at the back of the house, too, and brought down his gun in the signal to move in, smashing the window glass with the barrel in the same motion.

Glass jangled around him, most of it falling inside, and Illya opened fire, giving no warning. Julius was his first target. The giant was too dangerous to be left on his feet.

The men inside jumped up at the crashing glass, and Julius added to their confusion as he fell amid the furniture, dead.

Guns were raised inside the room but Illya struggled through the window. He was inside, and other men were coming through other windows.

Illya shouted, "Stand still, Napoleon! Just stand still!"

He watched Solo freeze, and turned, himself, to Adams. The room was alive with gunfire and whining bullets.

The other men could take Louie and Robard. Illya wanted Adams for his own. The old man faced him, deathly white, his hands empty. Illya started for him and Adams' hands dropped to a little end table in front of him. It came zooming forward on its castors, the knives speeding at Illya to impale him.

Illya propelled himself out of its way and bore down on the old man. But Adams wasn't giving up. He crouched behind a chair, liberally laced with icepicks, and shoved it ahead of him as he came to meet Illya.

Illya stood his ground, judging his moment. As the chair rushed at him, he tensed his thighs. As it came within inches, he leaped into the cushioned seat and over the back, coming down hard on the old man.

Adams sprawled and struggled, but one swift, slightly-pulled Karate chop to his carotid artery stopped the flailing and he settled down, groggy.

Illya scrambled up and whirled to help finish the room. Flashes of orange still came from the guns. Louie was bleeding on the floor. Robard fell. All down.

The violent noise halted as suddenly as it had begun. The U.N.C.L.E. team looked about for other targets. There were none. The only person in the room who was perfectly still was Napoleon Solo, slightly hunched, standing by the piano, not daring to move for fear of the knives and the bullets he couldn't dodge.

A great crash of glass cascaded from the wide front window and Mr. Waverly hopped over the sill, Mada in his wake. "Nobody opened the front door!" Waverly growled, hurrying straight for Solo.

Illya and Waverly reached Solo at the same time, and Waverly tore off the blindfold. Solo stood dazzled by the light, his forehead drenched with sweat, his body ready to collapse. He didn't say a word as Illya untied the rope and freed his arms.

Solo, his head released to movement, stared down at himself, taking in the rents in his suit and the blood. He glanced briefly about the room, noting the full horror of what he had been walking in for three hours, and still silent, held up his handcuffed hands to Illya questioningly.

Illya's blood was hot as he advanced to the place where Adams wavered between the guns of two U.N. C.L.E. agents. "If you have the key, Adams, don't hedge about it. Hand it over. Now!"

Adams smiled at him and dug out the key. "A pity," he said. "Ah, well, it's one for you, but I'll win the next one." His gaze lanced at Mada, angry

and accusing. “But to be betrayed -!”

Mada cried, “Oh, Uncle Abel!” She stood in the center of the terrible room, unsure which way to go as she saw for herself what Adams had done.

Illya said for her, “She didn’t betray you. You just presented her with one charm too many.” He unlocked Solo’s handcuffs.

His hands free for the first time in hours, Solo rubbed his wrists, but his movements were painful. The cuts and stab wounds were still bleeding and they had stiffened into fiery jabs.

Then Mada was upon him, her hands hard on his shoulders, her dress soaking up some of his blood. She peered into his eyes, her own red and wet. “I’m so sorry, Napoleon. You know I didn’t mean to have anything like this happen. You know that.”

Barely controlling himself, Solo stumbled back from her.

Illya pulled her off him and thrust her aside. “Napoleon has had enough Adams’ hands on him for one night.”

Waverly came closer, surveying the damage to his top agent. “All in one piece, Mr. Solo?”

Solo stared at Waverly, but said nothing, his jaw slack, his expression bewildered. Illya stayed close to him, watching, gauging, and as he did, the cold of ice seeped through Illya’s stomach. Napoleon was too silent.

The blond agent laid a reassuring hand on Solo’s good shoulder; pressing carefully. Solo tensed under his hand and shied from the contact. Illya didn’t like any of it. Napoleon’s eyes were dark and haunted. Illya had seen the look before - somewhere - and the recognition of it in his friend chilled him. He glanced over to Waverly.

The astute old man had caught the byplay and his scowl said he didn’t like it, either.

Waverly stepped away, motioning Illya to follow. He stopped a few feet from where the captured Adams stood, and his voice was concerned when he spoke. “Mr. Kuryakin, you’ve been with Mr. Solo many times after an action. After an interrogation, even. Is he usually this quiet?”

Illya hesitated, peering back at the bloody, slightly huddled figure of Solo. He had to give Waverly the truth as much as he hated to. “No, sir. I’ve never seen him like this. He comes up cursing or making bad jokes, as a rule. Still” - he searched for an excuse - “the circumstances are most unusual. Almost… fiendish.”

“Is that your Slavic, gypsy blood talking?” Waverly asked with no smile.

Adams cut in, “Why don’t you ask me, Waverly? I set it up. I didn’t manage to kill Solo, but I can tell you this - I ruined him! You’ll never be able to use him again!”

Illya swung to Adams. “There is more to this room than the obvious knives and abuse?”

“Of course, you fools. I’m an expert on psychology. I pulled the teeth of your lion, Waverly. With three hours of my plotted treatment under his skull, you’ll have to send him home to Mama for comfort.” Adams laughed his short sneeze of a laugh.

Illya wanted to cross the few feet and slam into the old man with both fists, but Waverly ordered Adams away with disdain. “Take that man out to a car and secure him,” he said. “See that he stays quiet.”

Illya walked back to Solo, Waverly dogging his heels. The blond agent decided to play an old game. He would force Solo to look at the room that had done this to him, to face it once and for all. It would be a grim sort of shock, but he was sure of Solo’s resiliency. He was equally sure that Solo must not be allowed to with draw any further into depression.

He put his hand on Solo’s shoulder again, ignoring the wince it evoked, and exhaled an astonished whistle. “You’re in pitiful shape, Napoleon, granted - but this is no time to feel sorry for yourself. I’d say you’re lucky to be alive.” When he got no response, he tried again, more bluntly, “Do you want me to pick up the knives and barbecue forks that have your blood on them? For your collection?”

Solo edged away, but Illya held him fast. “You’re not going to retreat any further, my friend, unless you knock me down first. And I wouldn’t say you’re in condition for that.”

Waverly whispered, “Easy, Mr. Kuryakin.” But he understood Illya’s maneuvering and was himself waiting for some starch to come back into Solo.

Solo stopped trying to pull away, his expression verging on anger. “Having a good time, Illya?” he asked.

“Not really,” Illya admitted. “But now that you’ve found your voice, tell me, what kind of place is this?”

Solo stared about the room dully and shivered, his eyes livening. “A do-it-yourself murder scene,” he muttered. “Don’t ever try it.” He pulled out of

Illya’s grasp and steadied himself against a chair, well away from the knives. There was more life in him. “I have a report to make, Mr. Waverly. Bits of information.”

Waverly was scowling less as the words came from his agent. “I expect you do - but later.” He took command. “Let’s get out now and have our wounds licked. Two of you men stay behind and remove these knives, please. I wouldn’t like any stray children wandering here in the dark.”

The room came to life. Men escorted Mada out, and Illya and Waverly flanked a limping Solo. They walked slowly, giving the man time. But Solo didn’t make it to the door. He lurched forward, unconscious on his feet, and Illya and Waverly caught him barely in time to save him from impaling his throat on a knife that jutted from the piano.

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The sky outside Waverly’s office was bright with sunshine when they met around the table. Solo had eased himself into his chair, dictated his report on Adams and Dundee, and now was simply waiting for the chance to take his aching body home.

It was amazing to him how the process of reentering U.N.C.L.E., having his wounds dressed, swallowing an anti-depressant the staff psychiatrist gave him, and being clucked over by the nurses had driven away the lethargy. He was himself again, and for a while he had wondered if he ever would be.

For the moment, he understood he had a thank you to offer to Lainy Michaels, who sat beside him at the table, her face bright and her entire soul caught up in playing nursemaid.

Mr. Waverly was finishing up the short briefing. “So Miss Michaels was the turning point for you, Mr. Solo. Mr. Kuryakin’s alertness provided the key, but she turned it.”

“With melodrama and infuriation,” Illya said. His arm was again in the sling where it belonged, and from his slightly glazed eyes, Solo guessed the anesthetic was wearing off. But Solo had no words of thanks for the Russian. That was all understood.

Instead, he looked gently at Lainy. “You actually attacked Mada? For me?”

“I was boiling mad.” Lainy flushed a pleasing pink. “I - well, you were always perfectly decent to me, and -”

Solo concluded for her, “And I have plans for being more decent. Now that the bleeding has stopped, I think I could use a steak, to rebuild the blood.”

“For breakfast?”

“Let’s call it dinner. How about it? Will you come and eat with me?”

Illya shook his head in serious-faced amazement. “Napoleon’s safe, anyway, Lainy. If he gets fresh, just squeeze any of his arms or legs and he’ll back off.”

She melted into a blue-eyed pool of sympathy, reaching over to pat Solo’s hand. “I’ll come with you gladly, but on one condition. That the steak is cooked and eaten at my apartment and that we share it with my cat. She must feel deserted.”

“Call her and tell her we’ll be there in a half hour.” Solo put his arm around Lainy and pulled her up. He shot one last look at Mr. Waverly. “It is all right if I leave now?”

“By all means. And” - Waverly cleared his throat - “all the alarm systems in your apartment have been reactivated. I think you understand my point.”

Solo grinned. “Yes, sir.”

“Report back the day after tomorrow, please. We’ll have finished with Adams’ interrogation by then and there may be something doing. Also - I have you scheduled to undergo a few tests.”

Solo walked out with Lainy. Not even Waverly’s mention of tests, which he knew would be psychiatric, could keep him from being warmed by the fact that U.N.C.L.E.‘s list of agents was still a secret because of him. Lainy fell into step with his limping gait and he let her keep the illusion that she was supporting him. It seemed to mean so much to her.

Chapter 8

“Shotguns, You Know”

FIVE DAYS LATER, Solo and Illya sat side by side in a rented car, Illya driving, doing seventy miles an hour down a modern expressway in Michigan. Chicago and the jet flight were only hours behind.

It had broken quickly. Adams’ interrogation had unearthed very little. Adams had merely been a research lackey working for Thrush now and then. He knew Dundee and that something big was up with Thrush - something to do with vegetation - but beyond that the drugs had proved he knew nothing more. His assassination scheme had been born out of Dundee’s derisive joke that if he really wanted to help Thrush he should find a way to keep Solo and Kuryakin in New York for a few weeks. Adams had found the way, going Dundee one better with his idea to destroy U.N.C.L.E. single-handed.

As the days had passed and Solo’s and Illya’s wounds healed, Mr. Waverly kept digging - for Dundee, for anything. It broke in one meager roll of film containing two pictures of a farm in Michigan that had been taken by an agent named Taylor. Taylor sent the film to Chicago headquarters and had then been murdered. Two bullets through the head. That made two agents down in this Dundee case already.

Solo recalled the sober-faced Mr. Waverly as he had shown the pictures Taylor had taken. The first one was of a cornfield at the end of July, the corn hip high and green, waving in military rows. The second, taken only three days later, was of the same corn field. But the military rows were gone. The cornstalks were brown and wrinkled and lying on the ground as though dehydrated and stamped upon.

Along with the film, Taylor had sent a brief message:

“First indications of Dundee Project shown in film. Tests of topsoil show total destruction of life-giving elements. No more crops for minimum of ten years. Brief investigation indicates possibility of chemical to restore earth. Will contact when more information is available.”

Whether or not he had ever gathered more information was unknown. Taylor was dead. And Waverly was up in arms. The implications behind such a Thrush plot were disastrous. If Thrush could treat the soil of the world and kill the vegetation, it could starve the earth into submission, promising the antidote only if the governments knuckled under. And they had an ace. By keeping certain lands clean and productive for them selves, Thrush could wait until starvation and riots set in, turning the knife for them in the stomachs of the world's hungry.

The order for the mission had been simple. Get the formula for, or a sample of, the counter-chemical. Then destroy the operation. The counter-chemical was top priority because once it was in the hands of the U.N.C.L.E. lab Thrush could sprinkle poison anywhere they wanted and it would do them no good. Finding chemicals meant finding the laboratory where they were produced, and no one believed that would be in Michigan. Michigan was simply the first lead.

Looking out of the car at the green that stretched for miles, Solo couldn't quite believe any of it. He saw the backs of farms that had been cut through for the roadway and everything was lush in the late July sun, soaking up light and water.

"That sign said, RIVERVIEW, NEXT EXIT," Illya said. "We're nearly there."

"The scene of Taylor's murder," Solo muttered.

"So? We'll be careful."

"Here, now," Solo chided his friend. "Quit reading something deep, and brooding into everything I say."

Illya wouldn't be riled. "Only checking. The psychological effects of what you went through might pop up at any time. The staff psychiatrist warned me."

"Is that so?" Solo was angry, in spite of himself. "And who gave you permission to talk to the psychiatrist about me?"

"The psychiatrist, of course." Illya smiled at Solo's consternation. "Seriously, Napoleon, it had to be done. I had to be briefed on you. But I don't want to keep the fact secret from you, either."

"And the psychiatrist told you?"

"What he told you, I presume. He said Adams ganged up on you psychologically, playing hard on every human fear in the book - fear of falling, fear of total darkness, of helplessness, of abandonment, of having

the body punctured - plus an overwhelming certainty that you were going to die.”

“He pronounced me capable of staying active,” Solo challenged.

“Yes. With the foreknowledge that odd symptom might pop up here and there, and to expect them.’

“And not freeze up over them. I know,” Solo sighed. “The battery of subjective tests I took showed the possibility. But it won’t happen, Illya, so don’t worry.”

“I believe it, I believe it!” Illya said. “Just remember, if you ever need an extra ear -”

“Illya’s here. Thanks. Now, don’t miss the turn-off.”

Illya swung off the highway at the exit and curved up the ramp. As the car came onto a narrow highway, a sign loomed up pointing out Riverview as five miles to the right.

Solo braced against the turn and changed the subject. Illya had guessed and had brought him nicely out of what might have become one of the moods he’d been having. Gloom and doom, Solo called them. “I thought Michigan Julys were hot,” he complained. “I brought lightweight suits.”

“Maybe we’re lucky,” Illya said. “I’ve never cared for heat, raised as I was in -”

Illya broke off as they rounded a curve on the narrow road. Solo leaned forward, an exclamation coming through his lips. Because the greenery stopped. Just stopped. Fifty feet ahead, the fields turned to brown desolation. The breeze stirred no crops and the fields looked as though a plague had descended upon them. It was a shocking sight. The only break in the brown sameness was an occasional tree.

“Why the trees?” Solo asked aloud.

“They send their roots deeper, I guess, so they aren’t damaged - yet.”

Solo bobbed his head to his partner’s strange bit of knowledge and continued to stare at the farms. The houses were neat and carefully kept; the buildings were painted in the traditional barn-red, the houses white, and the machinery stashed about was shiny and clean. But the grass was brown and wilted. The flower beds were tangled masses of dead stems and withered blossoms.

“It looks like the devil himself walked by here and blew fire on it,” Solo said.

“Pity the people who planted the crops and watched this happen overnight. This settles it, Napoleon. We’ve got to help them.”

Solo laughed out loud. “How grand of you to decide to go along with Mr. Waverly. When I make our first report, I’ll tell him and make his day happy.

They were coming upon signs of an approaching town. The farmhouses gave way to ranch homes; the fields withdrew to the backs of the properties, leaving dead lawns around forlorn-looking houses.

They had been ordered to stay at the Flower Hotel, the only one in Riverview. Solo guessed it wouldn’t be hard to find. Riverview was a town of four thousand people. As Illya swung the car onto the main street, Solo sat back, satisfied. It was just as he had pictured it. One street full of stores that ran for four blocks, crossed a bridge over a narrow river, and resumed being a highway. The Flower Hotel loomed by the bridge, old and brick, rising four stories to make it the tallest building in town. Three church steeples poked their spires up between the trees.

But modern America hadn’t passed Riverview by, as it hadn’t passed anyplace by. The street was garish with neon signs, and parking meters were lined up and down the curbs of the wide pavement.

Illya drove the car behind the hotel where the sign read, FREE PARKING FOR GUESTS and braked to a stop in one of the yellow-marked parking spaces of the tiny lot. There were a few cars already there. As Solo got stiffly out, unknotting his muscles from the long drive, he checked the lot out of habit. No one was sitting in the cars so there was no danger, but a good percentage of them sported stickers on their rear windows. He sauntered over to a green Ford and checked the sticker. U.S.D.A.

“The Department of Agriculture beat us to it, Illya. I guess we’re just an afterthought.”

Illya was hefting two suitcases out of the trunk of the car. He plunked them down. “We’ll be able to use any help we can get. Here’s your suitcase. What did you bring, anyway? You said your suits were lightweight.”

“Shirts, my friend. Lots of clean, white shirts. Ever hear of those?” Solo smirked at Illya’s ever-present black turtleneck.

“I’ve brought a couple of my own.” Illya’s blue eyes smoldered with as much humor as Solo was going to get out of him. “Also a tuxedo, a full dress monkey suit, and a top hat for courting the local beauties on Main Street.”

“Ouch.” Solo grunted, and bent to pick up his case.

They went into the old-leather smell of the lobby. It was complete with the red-patterned carpet of another era, black leather furniture, and potted palms. The palms were plastic, stuck into real dirt, Solo noticed as he passed one and the pungent scent of soil hit his nostrils.

There was no trouble getting their room. It had freshly-cleaned wallpaper done in a floral pattern, a small rug, and twin beds. A tiny bathroom opened off it, and the windows opposite the beds showed a view of the river and the cement-block factory that squatted there, ugly and sprawling. Solo tipped the bellboy, surprised to find one in the Flower Hotel.

Illya was already checking the room for “bugs” and Solo moved dutifully to help, although he couldn’t see the necessity of it. They were unexpected, after all. The room turned up clean.

As they unpacked their clothes and tucked them away in the oak bureau that was big enough to hold a man, Illya voiced the obvious question. “What’s the first order of action?”

“Who knows? We’ve seen the fields already. I think our best bet is to find some access to them. We can’t just go out and trespass. I understand that farmers are opposed to that sort of thing. Shotguns, you know.”

“And how do we get this access?”

Solo shrugged. He didn’t really know. “Poke around - meet somebody who lives on a farm - get invited to a homecooked meal.”

“I see.” Illya sighed in resignation. “That all adds up to a girl.”

Solo brightened. “It could well add up to a girl. And quit making faces. You follow your own prowling way and I’ll follow mine. Right now, I have first claim on the shower.” He made a quick maneuver for the bathroom, grabbing his robe, and beating Illya. He locked the door behind him on Illya’s sour call of:

“Be sure to use plenty of aftershave. It will charm the milkmaids right off their milking stools.”

Solo accomplished his routine of showering, shaving, and dressing in ten minutes. The cold water perked him up, brightened the sunny day, and the fresh clothes made him feel himself again. As he pulled on his shirt and trousers and watched them cover the barely healed scars of his night in that other farmhouse, his mind took a more sober bent. Even so, the best he

could think to do was go out on the street and get his bearings, see what was happening in the town, where it was happening, and try to pick up a lead.

When he broached this to Illya seriously, Illya agreed. They couldn't call down to the desk and ask for Thrush Headquarters. They had to dig it out for themselves.

"I'll take the car," Illya said, "and drive around to the grain elevators and feed stores to pick up the farmer's gossip if you want to stay in town."

"I'll do better in town," Solo said. "I wouldn't know what I was hearing when it comes to feed and fertilizers."

"Right. But you're going to stick out like crazy in this town; you know that, don't you?"

"You want me to wear overalls? Your idea of American farmers is pretty strange, Illya. I'll manage."

Illya went into the bathroom and closed the door be hind him. Solo called, "It's one o'clock. I'll meet you back here at three." Illya's answering "okay" came through a sudden gush of water from the shower.

Solo checked in the mirror to be sure his pistol was safely tucked away without trace under his arm, straightened his tie for the tenth time, and left the room.

The sun was bright on the street, a presence in itself, and he discovered that July was hot in Michigan. He walked along the sidewalk easily, peering into the display windows, and no one paid him any attention. Other men clad in business suits were on the street, along with housewives dragging their children by the hand. But the sidewalk wasn't crowded. The shops had eaten up the people from the cars parked along the curb. The parallel parking made the street even wider than it needed to be and he liked the sense of space and old ness it implied.

He wandered one side of the street for fifteen minutes, going into a store here and there to pick up pieces of conversation. It got him nowhere. The talk was about buying and selling, and only occasionally about the crop disaster. Even then it was only talk of confusion and fear. When he tried twice to approach some conversing ladies, he was rudely stared at and ignored. The old charm wasn't going to make way for him here.

He strode out of the dime store and back onto the sidewalk. He was awfully alone. Not another pedestrian walked this block with him. The only other living being he saw was a woman steering her little boy into the soda parlor. Then she was gone and he stood still in the sun, rocking on the balls

of his feet. A sense of over powering aloneness crept up on him and he pushed it angrily down. This was no dark room; he had both of his eyes, the sun was shining - He damned the unwanted emotion and stepped away from the storefront.

A horn sounded loudly from the street and a girl's voice yelled, "Mister! Sir - Mister!"

Solo turned to meet the half-running figure of a girl. She came onto the sidewalk smiling, dropping a coin in a parking meter where there was no car as she passed it. She was tall and blond with a figure that was astounding under the tight slacks and brightly printed shirt. She trotted along with firm steps. Wholesome was the word for her, he decided. Her body was young, ample, and gently muscled.

"Were you calling me?" he smiled.

"Yes, if you don't mind. I have this terrible problem and I wondered if you'd help me."

"Anything. Just ask."

She held out a set of keys that dangled on a leather strap. "Would you park my car for me? Right there in that empty space? I know it's crazy, but since they put in parallel parking, I simply can't handle it by myself. I always have to ask."

"And who would refuse?" Solo took the keys gallantly.

"It's gotten to be a town joke." She smiled at him. "All the boys know that if they want to talk to Gloryanna Piper, they only have to wait by an empty parking space. It causes me more trouble than good. You're the only man on the block today."

"And very obliging. I'll park it and be right back." Solo got into her car, swung it forward and then back into the cramped space. When he returned, she was standing hands on hips.

"Good job," she said.

"Now, is there anything else I can help you with? You look a little warm, so how about a soda, Miss Piper?"

She flushed. "Oh - I don't know -"

"My name is Napoleon Solo and I suggested a simple soda, not a drink. Chocolate, strawberry, pineapple…?"

She hesitated, then surrendered. "I suppose it would be all right." She linked her arm through his. "Make mine chocolate."

He led her along the street, liking the feel of her arm, strong and yet pliant. She seemed to be that way from head to foot. They entered the soda parlor and he was pleased to find it decorated in the old-fashioned tradition with wire-backed chairs and marble-topped tables. Pink and white walls sported pictures of confections. There was the traditional soda jerk, too, but his gaze wasn't friendly as he took their order.

Gloryanna looked down her pretty nose at him and concentrated on Solo. "You're with the Department of Agriculture?"

"No." He made up his mind quickly. It wouldn't do to identify himself with the government since they were here in such force. "I'm just passing through town. A friend and me."

"I'm glad. I don't think much of the Agriculture men, to tell the truth. They're very rude and I don't like their looks."

"Rude?"

"They swarm all over our farm, taking soil samples and checking about, but when Dad goes out to talk to them they treat him like the dirt they're walking on. We get the impression they wish we'd all move away and let them have the land."

"You've seen their credentials?"

"Of course. We wouldn't let them come around with out that. And there are so many of them."

"That's funny," Solo said. "I didn't see many names on the hotel register."

The sodas arrived, but Gloryanna went on talking. "They don't stay at the hotel. They have a better place, people say - fancier. It's a big estate about a mile from our farm."

Solo opened her straw for her and plunked it into her soda. "They like luxury, huh?"

"Well, it is luxurious. One of those gentlemen farmers, I guess you call them, built the place years ago. Acres and acres. A big house and big barns and a great fence all around it. It has hills and woods and a stream. I used to dream about living there. It stood empty for years, but a few months ago someone bought it. Not that we've seen anything of them." She sipped at her soda and smacked her lips. "I shouldn't be mean about them, though, because they did make one of their barns available to the road show that came to town. That was friendly enough."

“When was that?” Solo asked, knowing he’d soon have to stop the flow of questions or she would notice that she was giving all the answers.

“Right now,” she said. “It’s a big show and would have been such fun, only now we don’t have the heart for it. With the trouble and all.”

“Yes.” Solo let his expression fall, “I’ve seen the fields around here.”

“It makes you sick, doesn’t it? Even my flower garden is gone. My daffodils and spring flowers were so beautiful, but my annuals - Sometimes I don’t think I can stand to go out of the house and see the devastation.”

“Do you suppose I could get a closer look at the land?”

“To gawk?” She was angry. “It’s not nice to be curious about other people’s tragedies, Mr. Solo. We’ve lost every thing we planted. We may even have to sell our dairy herd because we have no pasture for them.”

“Sorry.” And Solo was. He didn’t mean to appear uncaring. Not to this girl with her special freshness and obvious misfortune. “Drink the last of that soda and I’ll splurge for another. A double, if you like.”

She forgave him with a quick laugh. “You’ll make me fat. But I’ll accept.”

They sat in the soda parlor for a long time, talking about nothing in particular, but it wasn’t wasted time for Solo. Gloryanna Piper was his link to the fields around Riverview and he had to make her consider him a friend. He had little in the way of solid leads, although the estate she had mentioned sounded interesting.

The door opened and out of long-trained habit he checked who was coming. It was Illya. He came in frowning. “Here you are! I’ve been looking everywhere. I thought you said three o’clock.”

Solo looked at his watch and found it was three-thirty. “My apologies, Illya. You should have rung me up.”

“I thought of it, and then thought better of it.” Illya was looking at Gloryanna. Solo made quick introductions. “I should have known.” Illya sat down. “Just follow the trail of the town belle and you find Napoleon.”

“Always,” Solo said. “But something more. Gloryanna is going to take us into her father’s blighted farmland.”

Gloryanna straightened, feeling herself maneuvered into a corner. “Now, I didn’t say I’d do that, Mr. Solo.”

“But you did. How about right now? While the light holds?” He softened the demand with a grin. “And call me Napoleon.”

As she grinned back, he coaxed her to her feet, giving her no chance to refuse. “Men!” she growled, and led the way outside.

Chapter 9

“I Prefer the Yellow-Bellied Thrush”

GLORYANNA PILED them both into the front seat of her car - after Solo had unparked it for her - and drove them out of town into the brown desolation. She pointed out the gated entrance to the estate she had mentioned but there was nothing to see from the road since the buildings were set far back on the acreage. A mile further on she entered her own driveway and braked to a stop.

“Come on and see what you have to see,” she called, striding ahead.

“Quite a girl.” Illya fell into step beside Solo. “She reminds me of Russian peasant stock - sturdy, lithe, and fetching.”

“There aren’t any peasants around here, my friend.”

“Right. But she reminds me.”

They trekked off the brown lawn and away from her mangled flower beds into a lane normally used by the cows to reach their pasture. The ground was uneven, and on both sides it stretched away brown and ruined. Solo kept glancing at the woods to relieve his eyes. Something in the terrible death of the crops was depressing. It seeped into his soul and made him uneasy.

Gloryanna stopped to let them catch up. “Well, this is it.”

Illya left the lane, going into the field and squatting down. He took up a stick and dug a bit in the earth, then picked up a handful of soil, squeezed it and let it run through his fingers. He looked expert, and Solo smiled at him. Illya was expert at everything, it seemed.

“It’s beautifully fertile soil usually,” Gloryanna told Illya. “It just seemed to turn on us. Almost like a plague from biblical times.”

“It’s a plague, all right,” Solo said, “but not of locusts or borers. I’d call it a plague of thrushes.”

She stared at him in astonishment. “You really don’t know anything about farming, do you? Thrushes never hurt our crops. Have you ever even seen a thrush, Mr. Solo? Napoleon?”

“Too many,” Solo said.

“Which one is your favorite then?” she pressed, trying to make him admit his ignorance.

“I’ll always vote for the yellow-bellied thrush. They’re easier to handle.”

“There isn’t any such thing!” she laughed. “I knew you’d hang yourself if I gave you enough leeway.”

Illya stood up from his soil sampling. “He’s teasing you, Gloryanna. Napoleon believes in the theory that if you don’t know something, never admit it; just use your imagination.”

Solo grimaced at Illya and stiffened. His eyes had picked up something else - strangers in the field, moving toward them with a steady pace. Two big men. “Is it my imagination that tells me two men are walking toward us across this field? And that they don’t look especially friendly?”

Illya stepped a yard away, braced, as he took in the menacing appearance of their visitors.

‘Those are just Agriculture men.” Gloryanna was confused by their wary behavior. “I told you they weren’t nice, but you don’t have to look like you’re going to attack them.”

Solo watched the men approach. They were both tall and dark. One of them was familiar. “Check the one on the right, Illya.”

“Got him,” Illya said. “I’ve seen him before and he was in full feather.”

A Thrush operative. Solo’s right hand moved with a will of its own toward his coat, but he held it back. It was too early to pull guns. Maybe this particular Thrush wouldn’t remember them, anyway.

Illya asked quietly, “Do we play innocent, or do I shoot? You give the word.”

“Shoot?” Gloryanna gasped. “Those men are from the Department of Agriculture! You can’t do anything. You have to let them have their way. And you have to be polite.”

“We’ll try,” Solo said and relaxed his right arm.

“There’s no trying about it, Mr. Solo. You simply have to, or you’ll make trouble for my father. These men are in charge here now.”

“All right.” Solo surrendered to her worry. “Play it cozy, Illya. Back out gracefully.”

The two men were twenty feet away and they came striding fast to stop in front of the little group. Their faces were pinched and ugly. “What’s this

supposed to be?" the one Solo had recognized demanded. A sight seeing trip?"

"Exactly," Solo answered. "Quite a sight, too."

"Unauthorized personnel aren't allowed in the fields."

"Yes, sir; sorry, sir," Solo said with mock subservience. "We didn't know that rule."

"Miss Piper knows it!"

"I'm sorry. I mean, really sorry," Gloryanna said. "I didn't see any harm in showing -"

The second man cut her off abruptly. "If I were you, Miss Piper, I'd pay attention to our rules. Careful attention."

The man's voice was edging upward. Solo backed off a few feet. "We'll get out of your way right now."

"I'd advise it," the man said. "And don't come back." Solo caught Gloryanna by the hand and started off as Illya followed, saying, "We'll leave the field entirely to you, sir." He caught up with Solo and muttered, "It's downright embarrassing, Napoleon, running like this."

"We'll have our chance," Solo promised. He looked over his shoulder. The two men were watching their re treat. He kept walking doggedly, starting to follow u the clues the girl had given him to keep his mind off the Thrush guns behind him. "Now, Gloryanna, where did you say this road show is set up? On the estate you showed us?"

"Yes. But I won't take you there. Something funny is going on. I can sense it."

"Woman's intuition?" Illya asked from the same need Solo had to make conversation.

"Plain common sense. Do you two carry guns? What the devil are you? Gangsters come to rob our bank?"

"We'll explain all of that," Solo told her.

"You'd better, and right away. Come into the house and I'll give you coffee and you can tell me. My guided tour is over."

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An hour later she drove them back to town, satisfied with the brief explanation they had given her, and oddly proud to be part of an U.N.C.L.E. operation. It had taken no convincing. She had doubted the identity of the Agriculture men all along, though she hadn't admitted it to anyone. She knew her County Agent, and her other contacts with the Department had

been with polite men who didn't order the farmers about like strangers on their own land.

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Back in the hotel room, Solo finished his report to Waverly. "They weren't U.S.D.A. men at all, sir."

"I discovered that, myself," Waverly said. "The U.S.D.A. is aware of the problem and was just ready to move in. Since we're there already, they've decided to let us handle it. After all, Thrush is our regular adversary so they feel we have the better chance. Do you have any substantial leads, Mr. Solo?"

"An insubstantial one, sir. The Cosmic Theater. It's a road show of some sort that came into town a few days ago. Headed by a Mr. Saturn. They're ensconced in a trailer camp on a country estate. They haven't put on a show yet because no one around here is interested with their fields dying under their feet."

"They came after the devastation?"

"They did. But their advance publicity men came before. That's why I'm considering them. Naturally, all of the Thrush operatives posing as U.S.D.A. men came after the trouble started, too. But there has to be a link somewhere."

"Find it then, and quickly," Waverly said. "We have indications that Thrush is stirring all over the world, preparing for something. Probably this chemical. If they distribute it before we have the antidote, everything is lost." Waverly paused briefly. When he resumed, his voice had changed from command to concern. "And how are you making out personally, Mr. Solo?"

Solo winced at the question, a bit angry. Was every one at U.N.C.L.E. going to mother-hen him until he proved himself? "Everything is fine here, sir. But if you're really not sure of me, then -"

"Temper, Mr. Solo."

To himself, Solo said, "Ooopsl" but to Waverly he said, "I'm sorry, sir.

"That goes without saying," Waverly answered.

Solo switched the transceiver off and looked, at Illya. The blond agent was barely suppressing a laugh.

"So, I put my foot in my mouth," Solo snapped at him. "You'd better watch when you smile or I'll carry your head home in a box, shaggy hair and all."

“Temper, Mr. Solo. Let’s eat and soothe the growling bear in you. Peace?”

Solo grinned and stood up. Food sounded just the thing to settle the sodas and strong coffee.

They went down to the hotel dining room and had a passable meal. The room was crowded but not one eye flickered in recognition as they sat finishing their dinner.

The Thrush agent in Gloryanna’s field obviously hadn’t recognized them. Solo thought they were still all right and could move about unhampered. Illya agreed. Hopefully. Because once they were pegged they stood little chance with the large number of Thrush men they had against them.

On the way back upstairs, Solo said, “We’ll be having a guest for late breakfast, Illya. Gloryanna.”

“Now, when did you manage that?”

“You have to run fast to keep up with me. Nothing romantic, mind you. But she’s our only link to this area and its people, and I want her around.”

“Besides which, she’s a pleasure to look at in those tight slacks,” Illya finished for him.

The next morning was sunny and boded stifling heat. Solo and Illya were downstairs waiting when Gloryanna pulled up in front of the hotel. Solo quickly ran out and parked her car, then hurried back to claim her from Illya’s interested attention.

As they went into the dining room, she called out to a few people she knew and made a charming unselfconscious display of herself in her bright red slacks and white blouse. Still there was no sign of menace from the men sitting at the other tables. They admired Gloryanna. Nothing more sinister.

With coffee steaming before them, Solo changed the small talk to important talk. Gloryanna was willing to be pumped since she realized it was for a reason. He began bluntly, “Tell us all you know about this Cosmic Theater.”

“I don’t really know much,” she admitted.

“Have you seen their setup?”

“Yes. In the old barn on that estate. It’s not much of a barn, really. Unused and falling apart.”

“The crop failure started before they arrived,” Illya said.

“A few days before. I see what you’re driving at, but it couldn’t be the Cosmic Theater that caused this.”

“Their advance men - their publicity men?” Solo asked.

“Let’s see.” She wrinkled her unwrinkled forehead, thinking. “They came here about a week before the show. “I put up posters and distributed leaflets and rented the barn. They brought this great big balloon with a basket under it and gave rides. And stardust for the kids.”

“Stardust?” Illya glanced up sharply.

“It’s just some sort of glittery confetti they handed out to the kids in sacks. Free. It’s all gold and pretty, though. The kids had fights with it and threw it all over the place until most people dumped it out because of the mess. It melted away in the rain.”

“What else did they do with the stardust?” Solo’s interest was caught hard.

“They dropped clouds of it from the balloon when they went up for rides. It was a beautiful sight. Mists of gold glitter.” She broke off, blushing. “I went out to the theater once. Sort of exciting, you know? I liked it a lot.” She shook her head. “But those things are just foolish dreams, like my Dad says. The dead crops are the real thing.”

Solo signaled the waitress for the check, suddenly eager to get out of the Flower Hotel and be underway. Stardust. Spread all about, over the town, over the fields, by children and by balloon. Little pieces of gold glitter that killed - probably with the first rain.

They went out onto the sidewalk. It was getting hotter by the minute. Illya asked, “Where is this balloon, Gloryanna?”

“On the estate. They haven’t taken it up since the show people got here.”

“By the barn?”

“No. Back farther. Behind the walnut grove.”

Illya made a fast decision. “I’ll take the balloon, Napoleon. And the car.”

“Check. And I’ll take the barn in Gloryanna’s car.”

Gloryanna clasped her hands. “Oh, good. I can go with you.”

“Nope,” Solo said. “I’ll drop you at home.”

“Then you can’t have the car, Napoleon.”

“A lot of good it will do you setting here at the curb. You can’t unpark it yourself.”

She thrust out a stubborn jaw. “There are lots of men in this town who’ll do it for me. That’s my deal. Take it or leave it.”

Solo uttered a short sigh. “I take it.” To Illya’s beginning protest, he said, “It should be safe enough. We haven’ t had any threats - yet.”

Gloryanna was eager. “Let’s meet afterward at my house. I’ll make lemonade and you can meet my Dad. He’d like to know who I’m coming into town to visit for breakfast. He said so.”

“I’ll bet he did,” Illya grunted, and left without a goodbye.

Chapter 10

“A Plague of Locusts, Maybe”

THE QUICK RIDE into the country only emphasized the heat this day was threatening to produce. Solo loosened his collar to let his skin breathe and listened to Gloryanna’s delightful babbling. He was surprised that they would be allowed entrance to the estate and the barn, but she said it was all right as long as they stayed outside. With such loose security about the place, he wondered if he were chasing a dead lead.

They turned off the road between the tall gates of the estate and followed a blacktopped driveway through a great expanse of dead lawn. A red barn grew up before them, ten trailers parked about it in haphazard fashion. The trailers were painted in garish letters advertising THE COSMIC THEATER—AN EVENING’S FUN FOR EVERYONE. There was no movement anywhere.

Far behind the barn stood a thick grove of trees, and from this vantage point Solo guessed it to be the walnut grove where Illya would encounter the balloon. Way beyond that was a green woods, deep, and running for acres. The landscape was surrealistic with its withered brown leading to green trees.

Gloryanna paid no attention to anything except carrying on about her father and how Solo had to meet him. “He isn’t awfully strict, remember, but he likes to pretend he is. Don’t let him scare you off.”

“Do you think he might try?” Solo held up his end of the banter although his senses were now alerted for movement, for action.

Gloryanna faced him squarely, a bold gleam in her eyes. “He might. Just this morning when I was describing you, he told me, ‘Gloryanna, never trust a man who has a twinkle in his eye.’ I took it all in very seriously, and then I told him I kind of liked the twinkle.”

“What did he say to that? Stay in the house?”

“No. He laughed. And made a remark about my red slacks.”

“If I were your father, I’d make a remark about those slacks, too. They don’t match your personality. They’re brazen and you’re wholesome.”

“Wholesome! What a nasty word.”

They came out from among the trailers to the foot of the barn-hill, the rise that slanted up to the double doors that were big enough to pass a hay wagon into the upper reaches of the barn. It was a gigantic structure, three stories high. The hill was matted with dead grass and well trampled, which meant well traveled.

Gloryanna halted at the foot of the hill. “This is going to be the theater. The plays will go on just inside the doors and the audience will sit down here.”

“They’ll get stiff necks.”

“But it’s nice, don’t you think? Mr. Saturn wanted to use the inside of the barn, but it’s such a mess. Dirty and full of old straw and spiders.”

“Let’s get a closer look.”

Gloryanna held him back. “We can’t go inside. I told you.”

“I can, Gloryanna. You wait for me out here. I’ve got to have a look around.” He headed away but she kept up with him, her red sneakers hitting the ground stubbornly. “Whither I goest,” he said to himself.

At the top of the hill, set inside the doors, was an area of big planks laid down to make a raised stage on the hard wood of the barn floor. Solo’s heels clicked on the wood and at the sound he eased himself to Gloryanna’s right so he would have his hand free for his gun if he needed it.

Deep in the barn - and it was a huge barn - the sun light shafted through dirty windows, producing small spotlights on the floor and lighting rusty farm tools. Straw matted the corners and old bales of hay were littered about. He went deeper, past the stage.

Nestled beside the central upright was a small mimeograph machine with big bottles of ink stacked beside it. The bottles were clean and white, opaque, and labeled Red and Black. What interested him most was the paper ready to be imprinted. It was very thin, tissue-like, and gold. He didn’t touch it, but Gloryanna did, holding a piece of it high. He could almost see through it.

“They’re going to print their programs on this,” she said. “They chop it up to make their Stardust. I watched them once.”

“Put it down!” Solo commanded. “Right now.” If Illya’s hunch was right, that paper could be impregnated with the deadly chemical and she

was getting it all over her hands.

She obeyed quickly, uneasy at the edge in his voice.

Solo poked at the paper with a pencil he found by the mimeo machine. Its presence, seemingly innocent, could indicate that the entire Thrush operation was being carried on from this one barn. He picked up the piece Gloryanna had handled and stuffed it in his pocket to send to U.N.C.L.E. in Chicago. If the report came back that it was untreated, then it was sensible to sup pose that Thrush put the chemical on it right here and that could mean the main lab was present here, too.

“Is there an upstairs or a downstairs to a place like this?” Solo asked Gloryanna.

“Yes - this is a very fancy barn. There’s an extra hay loft up that wooden ladder, and below us are the stables.”

“Hark!” A voice echoed through the empty barn, coming from over their heads. “The sound of intruders touches my ears. Who goes there?”

Solo stared up the ladder in amazement. Gloryanna touched his arm. “That’s only Mr. Saturn.”

Solo winced. “Oh, no. Does he always talk that way?”

“He’s a great actor, Napoleon. Very artistic. You’ll see.” Solo was afraid he would see, and waited for the sight, his right hand ready to slip out his gun. But the figure that appeared on the ladder relaxed him. First came ankle-high felt boots; next a pair of off-blue trousers; then a black, gold, and red striped dressing gown. The man’s head came next, underlined by a silk ascot. Mr. Saturn leaped the last few rungs and landed grace fully beside Solo. His left hand flourished an eight inch cigarette holder with a dead king-size cigarette in the end of it.

Solo estimated Saturn’s height at six-foot-six, and his weight barely one-seventy. The man was so thin that one good knotted fist to the stomach would go straight through and break his backbone. His head was long and his face lumpy with bones, his artificially silver hair dropping across his temple in dramatic style. He was a caricature, something dug up out of a theater trunk.

Saturn said, poutingly, “I called out but you failed to answer. I really must insist on knowing your business here. The theater is not open.”

“Oh,” Solo said, then lied, “I wasn’t aware of that. But I can’t say I’m sorry because I did manage to meet you. You can’t be anyone but Mr.

Saturn, himself.” Solo firmly believed that with this type, flattery would open all doors.

“Saturn at your service.” The thin man bowed. “But you, sir - who are you? The young lady, I already know.”

Solo gave his name right out. If Saturn was a Thrush operative, he was low level. He was surely incapable of running a big project like Operation Breadbasket. There was only a self-satisfied gleam in his eye to mark him as easy prey for Thrush, an easy pawn. “I’m Napoleon Solo.”

“An inspired name!” Saturn gushed. “An actor, naturally. I can tell by your stance.”

“Mr. Solo isn’t an actor at all,” Gloryanna said. “He’s -”

“A lover of the arts, only,” Solo finished. “I was passing through Riverview, saw your signs, and hoped to see a performance. But you look a long way from opening night.”

Saturn sighed. “Ah, yes. The tribulations. I came into town happily, balloons flying, banners streaming, and found only a morass of moroseness. It seems that the crops are failing or something. When doom sits upon the world, even drama must give way.”

Solo’s eyes still searched into the corners of the barn for anything that might be a lead. “You have a large company with you, judging by the trailers. It must be costing you a fortune to stay here inactive.”

“True, Mr. Solo. I have a good-sized group of men. Most of them aren’t performers, of course. They are stagehands, etcetera.”

“It’s a one-man show, then?”

“Not at all, dear sir. We have many, many acts. Tumblers, strong men, poetry readings, ballet, bits of classic drama, everything worthwhile. We use local talent where we can find it. I personally asked your delightful companion to read one of our roles, but she refused me.”

Gloryanna blushed. “I’d be petrified.”

“You’d be glorious, my sweet,” Saturn said, and leered at her.

“Come now, Mr. Saturn,” Solo said, “You can’t travel a show like this without trained actresses. You must have a woman in your suitcase somewhere.”

“They have a woman, all right.” Gloryanna said it almost angrily. “Some kind of super woman. I think she really does come from the moon, the way she walks and the way she looks.”

“Thank you, dear child,” came a voice from the loft. “You just keep on thinking that.”

Solo stared up the ladder again and this time the figure coming down was no caricature. It was all woman, her long legs swathed in the silk of full-legged lounging pajamas, her magnificent breasts barely contained by more of the silk, her wrists rattling with beads. She came down the ladder facing forward so each step was sensuous, snakelike, as she leaned back for balance. Black hair cascaded to her waist, and black eyes gleamed from behind long lashes. She was the first truly aware woman Solo had met since Rachel had run from him, and he turned his interested smile full on her.

Saturn stepped between them with one of his grand gestures and introduced them. “Napoleon Solo, this is Galaxy Talbot. A truly fine talent.”

“Obviously,” Solo said.

Saturn cleared his throat. “She is a fine ballet dancer.” Solo grinned hard at the woman. “It seems to me that the last time I saw you it was pronounced belly dancer. And your name was something like Nasheba. I couldn’t be mistaken.”

Galaxy had moved away from the ladder, her head high, her body swaying, but now she stamped her foot. “You make me mad, Napoleon Solo! You actually saw me and remember me!”

“Why be mad at that?”

“My agent never told me I was so good I made a lasting impression. I would have stayed with my career.”

“But this engagement paid more?”

“Pay! In this place?”

A hand tugged at Solo’s sleeve. It was Gloryanna, her eyes fixed hatefully on Galaxy. “We’d better go now, Napoleon,” she whispered urgently. “I have to get the car home.”

“Not yet. I’ve only begun to soak up the atmosphere.”

“There’s nothing here to see,” she insisted.

“Patience, Gloryanna.” Solo pried her hand loose. “A few more minutes.”

“Well, I’m leaving! I’ll go find - you know who. He’ll pay attention.”

Gloryanna was stamping out the door before Solo could stop her. He let her go. Women seemed to be running out on him right and left lately, but it was always running to safety, so he felt relieved when she disappeared.

“Hates competition, doesn’t she?” Galaxy said, tossing her long hair over her shoulder.

Mr. Saturn came forward with all of his commanding height. “Since your friend has left, Mr. Solo, perhaps you’d better follow. We have work to do and we’re not open for business.”

“Don’t you dare kick him out, Saturn,” Galaxy said. “He’s the first human being I’ve seen in a week and I feel like having a talk.”

Saturn waved his long-fingered, white hands. “Do it outside, then. All of our equipment is in here - costumes and everything - and I prefer not to have strangers wandering about.”

Galaxy took off, too, and Solo had nothing to do but trail after her. Luckily she went through the length of the barn, so he had his chance to check around. Near the end of the building there was a door set in the wall, low, with steps leading down to it. It had to go under ground, into the hill on the other side. He spotted some freshly dug dirt at the edges.

“Where does that go?” he asked Galaxy innocently.

She didn’t pause in her swaying steps. “To a root cellar or something. How should I know? I wasn’t raised on a farm.”

A new root cellar beside an old barn? He underlined the door on his mental list of things to examine more closely. There could be a shiny new laboratory down there. So far, that door and the paper were his only gains. Plus the fact that no one had yet made a hostile move.

They went down a ladder to ground level, where Solo saw abandoned stalls and stanchions for cows, and then stepped out into the sun. The brown fields were empty before them. Galaxy leaned against the barn, letting the sun bathe her face with gold. She already had a deep tan. Solo stared at her, at the empty fields, and back at her. Now was probably his best chance to investigate her and find out if he had a real bird in the hand or just some more window dressing. She could be part of the plot, or a pawn.

“How did you come to accept this job?” he asked, turning his interest in her full-on to make her talk.

“That wasn’t hard. Their dancer ran off somewhere, I got a hurry-up call, rushed out here, and - vacationsville!

“You haven’t performed yet?”

“Only on the streets of the town.”

“I don’t understand,” Solo said.

“Every time I go into town, it seems to be a performance.” She rolled her head back and forth, spreading the sun’s rays evenly. “I have an audience just watching me obey the traffic light or walk down the street.”

“I can understand that.” Through the soft caress she gave him on the cheek, he continued the questions. “You’ve never performed with Saturn, then? Not anywhere?”

“Not once. We no sooner made our grand entrance when this drought came and killed our ticket sales.”

“It’s no drought, Galaxy.”

“Then, whatever else it is that farmers are always fighting.” She closed her dark eyes, bored. “A plague of locusts, maybe.”

He thrust home the final test. “Not locusts, either. Perhaps thrushes.”

“Well, birds, then. Honestly, Napoleon, I didn’t come out here to talk about farming. I hate this place and I hate the sun and I want to come back to life. I thought you might help.”

Solo took her arm and guided her into the shade on the other side of the barn. Her answers had run true. Even through the mention of Thrush. His work was obviously finished here for the moment. He was standing just opposite the place where the inside door led underground, and there was nothing to be seen from outside. The cellar, or whatever, was entirely under the barn hill and had no windows. He checked his watch. He’d better give Illya another hour for his prowling with the balloon. He sat down on the brown grass and pulled the woman down beside him.

“You’ve decided to pay me some attention, after all?” She smiled. “I really think you prefer big blondes.”

“Not at all. It’s hot and I’m tired and this is a peculiar setting. If you want my avid attention, why not do a little dance for me, love?”

“All right, Napoleon, but I’m warning you - what I start, no one else can finish.”

Solo leaned against the barn and watched her begin the swaying and undulating that had first led him into the dismal little nightclub to see her perform. It was a perfect picture. The sun, the heat, the dark beauty of a dancer - he could squint and imagine the dead fields to be Arabian sand. He forced himself to relax and enjoy it, beating a rhythm for her. Illya was somewhere be hind that grove of walnut trees about five acres away, chasing balloons. And Illya had to have his time.

Chapter 11

“Illya Draws the Short Straw”

ILLYA SPED AWAY from the Flower Hotel, beating Solo and Gloryanna. When he reached the gateway to the big estate, he went on by, hunting for a place to hide the car. If the estate was crawling with Thrush agents, he wanted to remain anonymous as long as possible.

A quarter of a mile down the road he found a sign that read CATTLE CROSSING. By it was a little lane. He turned off there and made a sharp left to stop the car behind a high stand of sumac. He got out, already overly hot from being on the sunbaked road. He longed to abandon his jacket but didn’t dare. He needed his pistol and the coat to cover it.

Following the cattle lane, he went onto the brown land. It was bare of trees. He had nowhere to hide if he needed it so he walked nonchalantly, hands swinging, his mouth pursed, ready to whistle an innocent tune. But he didn’t whistle. He listened.

There was little to hear. Not even the sounds of birds. They had all left the fields and taken to the woods. He didn’t blame them. Birds weren’t meant for dead brown stalks lying on the ground.

He came to a fence, went through the ramshackle gate, closing it dutifully behind him, and headed for the barn roof he could barely make out and the grove of walnut trees. If the balloon was there, it was low and well hidden.

He strode along, forcing his legs to be fluid although his stomach was tensing wickedly. There was danger here somewhere. He felt it on his skin, on the nape of his neck.

He reached the walnut trees and buried himself in them, drawing some relaxed breaths as he was no longer an open target. The grove was two hundred feet deep and he traversed it quickly, liking the shade. He inevitably came to the end and in front of him was another field, barren and unearthly. Settled in the center was the balloon.

It was a giant, striped red, black, and gold, with a golden basket slung beneath. Tethered securely by two heavy ropes, it swayed as the breeze pushed it one way and then another. It was alone. That was his main concern.

He started across the withered grass and the balloon seemed peculiarly alive swaying before him. No one tended it, which was a bad sign. If it wasn't worth tending, then it probably wasn't worth investigating. But the golden stardust had to be the method of spreading the chemical. It made sense, and so little in this affair did make sense. First there had been Dundee, then Adams on his own terrible tangent, then these ruined farmlands. If everything led to the Cosmic Theater balloon, it was worthy of Thrush.

He approached the balloon, still walking easily in case there were unseen eyes on him. It hovered three feet off the ground, and when he touched the carriage, it tugged away from him. He scanned the ground for traces of stardust and found nothing.

"Anything you want, mister?" The voice came from behind him.

Illya turned quickly, knowing it was too quick for the part he was playing, but he was startled. A man was coming from the walnut grove - a big, battered man with the look of countless other Thrush apes he had dealt with before.

"That's rather up to you," Illya answered, settling composure on his face. "Are you giving rides?"

"Nope. Nobody's interested anymore but the kids. You like balloons?"

The man was beside him and Illya measured his own slight weight and height against the barrel chest of the other. He had to keep on with the charade. "Childish or not, I've always wanted to ride one. I never have. There aren't many around."

"How right you are. Had to have this baby made up on special order. I tell you, it's a great ride. Not like your airplane, where you're surrounded by metal. You just float around up there with the birds and clouds."

Illya caught hold of the basket carriage and pulled it to him, craning to peer inside, "That's how I've pictured it in my mind's eye." He was uneasy with his back to the big man, and held himself alert. There was no trace of stardust on the ground. Perhaps inside the basket - if he could manage to get inside, "I saw your ads in town when I was passing through, and decided,

here’s toy chance. I’m disappointed. Could you be persuaded for - say ten dollars?”

“Sorry,” the man answered. He was at ease, and Illya gave himself an “A” for acting ability. “But get into the carriage and see how it feels, if you want. It sways a little bit.” He opened a lock on the carriage and pulled the door wide.

Illya took the big step up, catching his balance against the sway. The carriage door closed and locked behind him. The basket itself was four feet deep, so he was only chest and shoulders above the top of it. He again scanned the floor for stardust, and it was again clean.

“Now,” the man laughed, “I suppose you want to see the glitter. No” - he waved Illya’s protest down - “don’t be embarrassed about it. I’ve worked with carnivals too long not to know that expression - like when an adult is itching to ride the merry-go-round but hasn’t got a kid with him for an excuse. So - see the glitter. It’s stored in that metal box on the floor. Open it and pick up a handful.”

Illya laughed and went to one knee in the swaying basket to get his prize. As he dropped, there was a sudden lurch of the basket, throwing him forward. He toppled on his face and scrambled to stand up, yelling, “Hey, out there! Take it easy!”

By the time he had regained his feet, he saw that there was no taking it easy anymore. The man had detached one mooring rope and was fast doling out the other. The balloon was rising. It sailed off the brown grass, the black, red, and gold bag taking the air like a bubble.

Illya walked gingerly to the edge of the carriage and peered down. He was already up thirty feet. He put a smile on his face, keeping up the pretense. “Did you change your mind, mister? Because if you did someone had better come with me. I don’t know how to operate one of these things.”

The balloon kept rising. Forty feet. Fifty. It jerked to a halt as the man pulled on the tether. He jumped nimbly out of Illya’s sight under the basket and shouted up, “Throw your glitter, U.N.C.L.E. agent. Throw yourself out if you want. But you’ll drop fifty feet and I won’t pick up the pieces!”

Illya ducked into the shelter of the basket and drew his pistol. It had been a two-way game, then, with both of them playing innocent. He sneaked his head and gun up over the edge of the carriage, but immediately knew it was useless. The man was directly under the basket. He couldn’t find him for a target. And worse - he heard the Thrush calling someone on a

communicator. Pieces of the words reached him: “Got one of them… here fast… no sweat.”

“We’ll see about the no sweat,” Illya muttered. He wasn’t going to be trapped like a puppy in a Christmas stocking for very long. If his target wouldn’t come to him, he’d go to his target.

He stared at the belly of the balloon, estimating what might happen if he shot a hole in it. As though in response, the shout came from below. “Don’t bother trying to shoot the thing down, U.N.C.L.E. man. It’s armored. A new process. Do you think we’re stupid, or something?”

Illya didn’t answer, thinking his own thoughts. Reinforcements were coming from Thrush, so he didn’t have much time. He’d take the man’s word that the balloon was invincible. There was another way.

He heaved himself onto the narrow edge of the carriage, setting up a terrible sway. He dangled one leg over the side, waiting for the balloon to balance again. If he could find a handhold and lower his body upside-down on the length of the carriage, he could get off a shot at his target underneath. If that failed, perhaps he could catch the tether and forcibly pull the great bag to the ground. He’d try the shot first and use the tether for his escape.

Grasping the rim of the basket with his left hand, he lifted his other leg and lay along the curved edge. He had to go head first or get a leg blasted through. There were loops imbedded halfway down the basket, holding the balloon onto it, and he could grab for one of those.

Using his knees to hold himself, he dropped his left hand down to one of the loops, and caught it, and grasped it hard, damning the heat-sweat that broke out all over him and threatened to reduce his grip to nothing. He slithered groundward, changing his hold from his knees to his feet, keeping firm with the left hand on the loop. It was working, but using all of his breath. If he could get down to a toe-hold on the basket rim, he’d have one chance at a shot. He slid his feet cautiously, catching with the laces of his shoes, ready to slither the rest of the way.

The man below him, like some devil out of a nightmare, tugged on the tether rope, flailing it back and forth. The basket lurched and Illya lurched with it, his feet slipping, his left hand and arm twisted and burning with pain, holding him up, but barely.

A movement started in his left breast pocket and his communicator slipped out, falling like a silver dart to the brown grass. He couldn’t even grab for it. Fighting to keep himself from the same fall, he floundered about

with his legs, holding his body stiffly upside-down in a one-hand-stand on the rope loop. His ankles caught the basket rim and he grabbed it. He tried desperately to get his gun back into the holster but it was useless, and without two hands, he was going down head first. With a terrible sigh, he let the gun fall. The man below would know he had victory for sure.

The drop of the gun was the signal for the man to stop shaking the tether and the balloon quieted. Illya took advantage of every second of equilibrium and heaved himself back up, using his right hand as a grappling hook. He was on the rim with his stomach, and then his chest. He dropped his feet inside the carriage and fell bodily, panting on the floor.

As he lay there, relieved to be alive, he reached over and flicked up the lid of the stardust box. It was empty. All this, and it was empty.

He sat up but didn't stand, wanting the protecting basket around him. The victors would come soon enough.

He wondered where Napoleon was. Probably, with his jaunty friend's good luck, he was basking in Gloryanna's smile and eating a homecooked meal while convincing her father that he was a sincere and harmless man who never noticed the tight fit of her red slacks.

Illya swallowed hard, searching for some moisture in his body against the terrible heat. He stared at the underside of the balloon and muttered, "I might at least have brought a box lunch."

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Fifteen minutes later a little parade came from the direction of the road. Illya watched it with mixed emotions. It would be Thrush reinforcements, but it would also mean he could get down out of this baking basket. It consisted of a station wagon and a pickup truck, both fire-red and white, and it bounced across the dried fields.

He peeked over the edge of the carriage as the parade stopped and people emerged from the vehicles. The first man out was a cartoon character, tall and thin like something dragged out of a casket, dressed in blue trousers and a loud printed shirt that no corpse would tolerate.

The balloon man came out from under and said, "He's up in the balloon, Mr. Saturn. The neatest capture I ever made. He's unarmed, helpless, and hot as a piece of butter in the sun."

Mr. Saturn clasped his hands with a flourish. "Wonderful, Charles. Now we can play a bit."

Another, broader man emerged from the truck and came to Saturn. “Not long, actor-boy. The shipment has to go out tonight and there’s a lot to be done, so we cant fool around.” He was immediately backed by four more men, all recognizable as low-on-the-totem-pole Thrush muscles. Illya wondered at it. Why such an important operation as this crop killing affair was left in amateur hands, he couldn’t understand. If Mr. Saturn was in charge, then Thrush hadn’t planned well.

“I realize all of that, Barber,” Saturn said, “and the shipment will go on schedule. But we can spare a few minutes to eliminate an U.N.C.L.E. agent, can we not? A few imaginative minutes?”

“Imagine away,” Barber said. “I’ll give you half an hour.”

Saturn spurred himself into action. “Pull the U.N. C.L.E. man down and let’s see what we’ve caught.”

The balloon was yanked down, going in glides and spurts, and Illya stood up, making himself visible, noting the sudden appearance of guns in the hands of the six gorillas. The basket jolted against the ground, then was allowed to slide back to hover three feet high. Charles, the balloonman, opened the door, and Illya jumped out among his captors, returning their stares with his own noncommittal one.

Saturn towered over him. “Well, U.N.C.L.E. man, how does it feel to be in the firm hands of Thrush?”

“The same as it has felt a hundred times before,” Illya said. He kept his hands quiet, away from his body, not wishing to call down a storm of lead.

“I must think of something appropriate for you.” Saturn drew a thin hand across his hot forehead. “It may take a while. Can you wait?”

Illya focused his eyes on the guns for an answer.

Barber hurried Saturn. “You don’t have time, actor-boy. Whatever you’re going to do, do it. Dundee will be here before you know it, and if you’re not ready -”

Saturn went slightly pale. “I detest that man, Dundee, wholeheartedly. He is vulgar and insensitive. But - tell me, Barber, what do you usually do with U.N.C.L.E. men?”

“Kill them,” Charles said. “That’s all they’re good for.”

“By hand?” Saturn was repulsed.

“By bullet,” Barber said.

“Too plebian.” Saturn peered down his long, long nose. “That’s why you fail to be promoted. Thrush is noted for its evil imagination, and if I’m

to keep rising, I must do something worthy of Thrush." He came close to Illya, studying him. "I had your cohort right in the palm of my hand this afternoon, young man. Right in the palm of my hand."

"I'll bet you did," Illya said, noticing and liking the use of the past tense. Obviously Napoleon hadn't been taken, and where there was a loose Solo there was always hope.

"Now, what is it you remind me of?" Saturn thought aloud, taking his time, pacing. He scanned the landscape. "We have here the elements of a climatic scene, if we can only piece them together. The backdrop - farmland. The leading character - a smallish man with a straw-colored mop of hair. Yes!" He stopped pacing and pointed a narrow finger at Illya. "You turned out to be a strawman despite your high-sounding U.N.C.L.E. position, didn't you? We'll let you play your role right out to the end."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Barber asked.

Saturn strode for his station wagon. "Bring him along. I want more seclusion than we have here. The back pasture, I think. It's sheltered by woods on three sides and - yes, bring him along."

Saturn was already in the station wagon when Illya reached it, surrounded by the ugly Thrush guns. He was pushed into the back and crowded by two burly men whose deodorant protection had already run out on them in the heat. The wagon bounced forward, took to a lane, and sped to the rear of the estate.

Illya spied the selected site before they entered it. It was a broad field, full in the sun, with forest rising on three sides and big rocks scattered in its dried grass. It had never been cultivated. He wondered what this frustrated Macbeth could have in mind?

The station wagon braked abruptly and Saturn had center stage again. "Bring him out into the field, right to the middle. Someone fetch two of those old fence posts" - he pointed to the place where the fence had fallen - "some strong wire, and some straw out of the truck."

Illya stumbled between the gorillas who poked at him with their guns. He saw a man coming with straw filling his arms. Three guards stood by him while the others gathered the posts and the wire. Illya had a queasy feeling that he could see into the future and knew what was coming.

"Okay," Barber said to Saturn. "You've got everything you ordered. Now what? And you don't have much time."

“Just a bit of work, Barber. Set the largest post up here - in the ground - and make a crosspiece of the other one. Wire it so it will support weight. Move this big rock and you’ll have the posthole already started. It will save time.”

“What the -?” Barber demanded.

“Use your mind, Barber! I said this U.N.C.L.E. agent was a straw man. Now we’re going to let him become one - literally. A scarecrow!”

Barber’s big face was smothered in confusion, then it split into a grin. “Scarecrow! Beautiful! I hand it to you, Saturn. It’s beautiful. He can’t scare Thrush, but maybe crows, huh? Get busy, boys. Make the rig for him.”

“Yes, the rig.” Saturn smiled, eating up the praise. “And the goodly hot sun will do the rest.”

Illya moaned to himself. He had thought of dying many times, and of many ways of dying, but this - as a scarecrow in a dead field under the blaze of July sun? It wasn’t worthy.

He had no time to pursue the pessimism because Saturn pulled his jacket off him, ordering the sleeves stuffed with straw. It was done, they dressed him again, and Saturn walked around pulling at bits of straw to make them stick out of his sleeves authentically. He bent and stuffed some into the legs of Illya’s trousers.

“Perfect. Even Dundee will have to admire me for this,” Saturn said. “You play your part wonderfully, Mr. - what was your name?”

“U.N.C.L.E. man,” Illya said. “Remember?”

“If you really want to die anonymously, so be it. Every man has that right.”

“The posts are ready,” Charles called. “But I say he needs a little extra sendoff. You can’t just capture an U.N.C.L.E. agent and let him die in peace. You have to leave some evidence to scare the rest of them.”

“Right,” Barber echoed. “Let’s make some physical contact. Give him some lumps to think about while he dies.”

Saturn nodded. “Good thought. Without it, U.N.C.L.E. might think this elaborate death was just the aberration of an actor. Well, I’m no actor and they may as well know it now.”

Illya stood between the two Thrush gorillas, felt their hands grab his arms, and prepared his body to take the pummeling it was going to get. He relaxed into the strong grip of his captors, leaning on them, so that when the

blows came and his body recoiled, they would absorb some of the impact as they held him up. He consciously set his stomach muscles, positive that after a few smashes to his face the men would concentrate on his midsection. He adjusted his mind to think of the coming fists as no more than the hard throw of a medicine ball. But all the time he knew it wouldn't feel like a medicine ball at all.

The first fist darted for him, catching him on the cheek, and he rolled with it, but the second caught him full force. His mouth was hit and his teeth cut his lip, bringing salt and blood. He let his cries fall where they might. This was a good old-fashioned beating that didn't call for heroics, and he didn't care if they knew they were hurting him. Open hands and closed hands smashed into his face, and then, as he had guessed, they moved down to his stomach. The sun was unrelenting, his own sweat blinded his groggy vision, and he swayed.

Pound, pound, pound. And some vicious kicks. He couldn't accept it anymore and got off a kick of his own, well placed, that sent a gorilla rolling on the brown grass. For his effort, the kick was returned two-fold. His head wobbled on his neck and all that was holding him up were the strong hands of his restrainers.

"Enough," came the voice of Saturn. "I want a live scarecrow and you're killing him."

The beating halted, but Illya hung limply. Let them do the work, he thought. Let them lift him about. He wasn't using another ounce of his sparse energy.

Lift him they did. The cross bar wired to the fence post was run through the sleeves of his jacket and his jacket was buttoned across his chest so that he was hanging by his arms, limp, ragged, as a scarecrow should hang. His feet were tied to the main post and then Saturn was busy replacing the fallen straw. Saturn stepped back to survey his work, judging it perfect. Illya's arms dangled from the elbows at the point where the cross bar stopped supporting his jacket, his hair fell across his forehead, his neck was limp, and he spouted straw from arms and legs.

"What did I tell you?" Saturn chortled. "He's perfect." He came to Illya and said, "The forecast for today is ninety-eight degrees, and humid. How long do you really think you can last in the full sun, with no water?"

Illya stared at him but said nothing. His throat was too dry, his stomach too sore, for the effort.

Saturn continued. “I think you’ll probably survive the day and the night, but tomorrow is going to be even hotter. So they say. Don’t despair. We won’t leave you here forever. Once you’re well dead, we’ll take you down and ship you back to U.N.C.L.E. Fair enough?’

Illya did find his voice this time. “Such consideration is heartwarming.”

“Good.” Saturn patted his knee. “Now play your part well.” He admired his coup once more and strode for the station wagon. “Come along, boys. The vulgar Mr. Dundee will arrive soon, and that other U.N.C.L.E. agent may pop up again. If you’d been at the barn when I needed you, we might have had both of them at once.”

The six men trooped off after Saturn. Illya watched them go, then closed his eyes against the glare that beat on them from the sun. He tested his bonds and it was clear that he bad no chance of getting free. Saturn might be playing this like a stage performance, but he was certainly good at it. One thing was certain. He was going to be a strangely tanned corpse.

Chapter 12

“Chicken Feathers!”

SOLO LET a full hour pass lolling in the shade with Galaxy. Half of his mind enjoyed her languorous company, her soft hair, her pliant body; the other half kept track of his watch. One hour. Illya should have completed his prowling by now. He broke up the tender moment by shifting so Galaxy’s head couldn’t rest on his shoulder.

“You look like a man about to depart,” Galaxy said softly.

“I can’t spend the whole day dallying, love.”

“Duty calls?”

“Not duty. Common sense calls.”

“But it’s been so nice.”

Solo stood up, brushing the dust from his suit. “A piece of advice - get back to New York and start dancing. You’re depriving a world full of lonely men.”

She laughed, but it was short, interrupted by the tread of hurried steps. Mr. Saturn came around the corner of the barn, his thin face red. He stopped quickly, blanched, and recovered himself. “Galaxy! Are you still showing Mr. Solo the wonders of farm life? You might have known I’d need you.”

Galaxy got up, the languor gone. “For what? I won’t help clean up the barn. That’s not what I was hired for.”

“The luncheon supplies, my dear. It’s already late. Come now, Galaxy. Right away.” Saturn sent a message of haste with his caricature eyebrows.

Galaxy grimaced, squeezed Solo’s hand, whispered a farewell, and left obediently.

Solo grinned. “Bravo, Mr. Saturn. You’ve found the way to out-argue a woman! You should write a book.”

“I’m in a bit of a hurry, Mr. Solo, if you don’t mind. And I’d prefer to have the theater locked when I leave.”

“Right.” Solo bowed slightly. “I’m on my way.” Saturn was nervous, almost wary of him, but he didn’t want to press the point now. He started

off on a course that would take him around the barn.

“Come back through the way you came, please,” Saturn told him. “I have the terrible sense of you trespassing out here while I’m innocently busy.”

Solo obeyed, too, as Galaxy had. He followed the tall man inside, and at the foot of the loft ladder, halted. “I can see the open door from here. You go on with your shopping trip and I’ll get out of your way.”

Saturn watched Solo walk across the board stage and down the hill, then he climbed the ladder. At the last of Saturn’s hurried shuffle, Solo spun around and sped back into the barn, running the length of it, keeping his feet to the straw patches for silence. He came to the underground door he wanted to investigate. From the loft he could hear voices, but gathered no words. There were four voices up there, not just Galaxy and Saturn.

Cautiously, he tested the door. Locked. He examined the lock and it was as he expected - new and tamper-proof. He’d have to burn it off. It would be a dead give away to the next Thrush who walked by that U.N.C.L.E. was present on this farm, but Mr. Waverly had ordered haste, so perhaps it was time to make their presence known.

He crept back to the ladder, where he could pick up words from the loft. Saturn was urging Galaxy to hurry, and talking to another man he called Barber. One of them was pacing up and down, clomping on the floor.

Saturn finished his instructions to Galaxy. “Take one of the cars and while away some time in the stores, or give the local boys a thrill. Then buy the supplies and get back here.”

“Why can’t Barber go?” she asked.

“Because you know what he likes, and I need Barber here. Now hurry, woman. Dress! I have important things to do.”

“Don’t order me about, Saturn. I did my part. I kept Solo occupied for a full hour. You’re the one who failed. You didn’t take him.”

“Because you didn’t signal me that he was still here and I didn’t bring enough men. There he was, and there I was - alone. All I could do was see to it that he left. He won’t have time to bother us now, and I have so much to prepare here yet. Hurry. Please.”

So, they knew already. It made no difference then what Solo did to the door. He returned to it and began working, using a heat plastic around the lock and the knob, avoiding explosives. He frowned as he worked. Galaxy was in with Thrush, after all. Her lipstick was still red on his cheek, but she

had been stalling him as he had been stalling her. She was a better actress than she knew, because he had believed her when she brushed off his baited question about Thrush. That was the only consolation with Thrush. Their women were usually very special to look at and very adept at casual love. Soft lips and cold hearts.

He pressed the plastic in place and stood aside while he activated the mechanism on his watch to trigger the heat process. It began with a glow and ended with a flaming hiss. It was done. The door was free. He hit the door and stumbled down some steps to the underground room. It was totally dark. There was no window to even suggest the hot July sun that raged outside.

For a short moment, Solo stood still, grabbed to his right and clutched a table. The darkness was total, and deep. He pushed back his shoulders, drew a breath, and let go of the table. He wouldn't give in to any of that!

He took out his pencil flash. Seeing the room in small, lighted sections was odd, but showed him what he needed. This room was a laboratory, all right. And it was completely empty. Whatever it had manufactured or bubbled in test tubes had been carted away.

He inched his way back to the steps and voices from the barn froze him by the door. The group was down out of the loft. He heard murmurings, but again no clear words. The soundproofing down here was too good. He edged the door open a tiny crack and listened.

The voice he recalled as belonging to Barber said, "Solo's car is still outside. So where is Solo?"

"It wasn't his car," Galaxy answered. "It belonged to the Piper girl. Maybe he decided to leave it for her."

"We have no time to hunt for him," Saturn said. "Leave someone to guard the barn. We must get going!"

The arrangements were quickly made and Solo heard three people bang over the stage boards on their way out. Somewhere in the barn was a man with a gun, waiting for him to show himself.

He might outwait him. He closed the door and sat in the dark, figuring. He didn't dare call Illya. Too many times the pocket transceivers beeped at the wrong moment and gave everything away. He'd leave Illya alone. Give them all ten minutes to clear the area and he could take the one-man guard easily. He hoped. He made himself comfortable, pulled out his gun, and attached the silencer.

Ten minutes weren't enough. His lone guard was joined by more men, just a drone of voices and occasional footsteps above him. Luckily they didn't come near the lab door, but they had him neatly boxed without being aware of it. The odds were too great this early in a mission, so he leaned back to wait some more. Surely some of them would get bored and leave.

It took another half hour of waiting in the dark before the extra feet clip-clopped away. He opened the door a crack and listened. No voices. The guard must be alone.

Creeping out of the dark, Solo slithered through the door on his stomach and let his eyes adjust to the light inside the barn. There was his adversary, squatting by the wall, halfway down.

Since shooting from ambush wasn't his style, he stood up, yelled, "Hey, buddy, still waiting?" and brought up his gun. The guard went into frantic motion, stiffening himself and raising his rifle at the same time. The rifle never had a chance to crack the silence. Solo's U.N.C.L.E. Special whispered under the silencer and the man toppled onto a bale of hay. Solo fled, pausing only long enough to be sure the way was clear. He ran down the hill for Gloryanna's car.

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The Piper farm was quiet when Solo careened into the driveway, but Mr. Piper wasn't long in coming out. He was a big blond man with the same candid eyes Gloryanna had except that they squinted with worry. He knew nothing that helped Solo. Gloryanna hadn't come home from her breakfast date in town, he had seen no trace of a blond man named Kuryakin, and he wished someone would tell him what was going on. For a sendoff, after he repossessed his car, he made oblique threats against Solo.

"Now that I see you, young man," Piper said, "I would just as soon my daughter stopped making dates with you. You're not the kind I have planned for her. She's very special, you know"

Solo's assurances that he did know got him nowhere. Piper kicked him off the property and he went docilely. He'd been thrown out by fathers before.

Solo walked a wary quarter of a mile on the road, then stepped off into the sumac, hid himself, and tried to raise Illya on the transceiver. It came up blank. Concern lightened in him. Illya must be in trouble some where. And where was Gloryanna? There was nothing to do but return to the Thrush

establishment and take his course from the balloon by the walnut grove. He'd find Illya one way or another.

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Illya hung limply on his scarecrow post, telling himself that his tongue was not swelling, be was just miserably thirsty. Sweat poured into his eyes, his hair was soggy with it, and every bone in his body ached. He was incredibly alone. One bird had peeped at him on its way by, but that was all. He estimated that he had hung here for two and a half hours. He had a lot more time to go.

The sound of cars approaching lifted his head. It brought pain to his neck and dizziness spots before his eyes. Two cars came, both station wagons. Saturn, Charles, Barber, and three other men got out, dragging Gloryanna with them. Her blond hair was mussed and tangled, her face tear-streaked, but they had to pull her along. She was too stubborn to submit without a fight.

Illya only moaned, "Oh, no!" at the sight of her. He hated to drag innocents into these things.

When Gloryanna spotted him she threw off her captors and ran forward. "Illya! I didn't recognize - Illya! What have they been doing to you?" She whirled around, confronting Saturn. "You can't do a thing like this! People can't do things like this!"

Illya murmured through his thick tongue, "People can and do, Gloryanna. Don't make him any more enraged than he is. Be careful. He's no fool. He just pretends to be."

She patted his leg comfortingly, unaware that she brought him pain. He had thought his legs were entirely numb, but she proved him wrong.

"I was waiting by the balloon for you," she said, "and they grabbed me. Why?"

Saturn smiled. "Now, Miss Piper, we'll do for you what we did for him. We'll let you play a part in this drama. How would you like that?

Gloryanna was frank. "I don't think I would."

"But you have already started by poking about the estate, by being with Solo when he came prowling. You've chosen your side. You must bear up."

Barber interrupted, still impatient. "Saturn, I came out here only because you said it wouldn't take much time. Dundee is due in two hours. Now hurry up or I'll put bullets in both of them."

“Patience, Barber. Things are well in hand. I have the perfect way to place Miss Piper here with the scare crow. Charles! Bring the equipment. Miss - start undressing.

Gloryanna recoiled and backed into Illya, swaying his post out of balance and bringing a groan from him.

“Well, hurry up!” Saturn said. “Have you ever seen a crow in red slacks?”

Gloryanna gasped. “A crow?”

Illya watched Charles unload two containers from the second station wagon. One was warm, liquid tar; the other was a great box of chicken feathers that spewed out as be walked, making a snowfall behind him.

“Oh, come on, Saturn,” Illya protested. “You’re not that crazy.”

“You shut up! This is entirely my affair. You’re a dead man.” He moved in on Gloryanna. “Are you going to undress, or must I rip your clothes off?”

Gloryanna was trembling from head to foot, one hand clutching at her shirt, the other reaching for Illya. “Illya! Please - tell me what to do.”

Illya closed his eyes. He couldn’t help her. “Do as he says, Gloryanna. And be slow about it,” he added in a whisper. He damned his profession where the best hope often meant stalling for time. Time for a girl to suffer, most probably.

Gloryanna faced Saturn bravely. “I’ll do it, myself.” Her fingers moved up to her shirt buttons. “But I’ll keep on my underclothes. You’ll have to kill me to get those off.”

She cried and shivered and unbuttoned her shirt, and Illya forgot the heat and glare as he watched her. He only hoped that Napoleon would do well for Saturn when the tall, skinny man’s turn came at dramatics like this.

Chapter 13

“Kiss the Maiden All Forlorn”

SOLO WAS PANTING in the heat, running from one stand of trees to another, trying to keep to cover. It was nearly impossible in these dead fields. The balloon had been no help. Red and black and gold, it was alone. Red, black, and gold. Ink bottles flashed in front of his mind. And gold paper for printing. Saturn was running more of a Chinese circus than a road show with his choice of colors.

He was nearly to the back of the estate. There would be one field left, and if he found no Illya there, where could he search next? He made the final dash to a thin row of trees and caught his breath.

The brown field before him was surrounded on three sides by woods, the deeper stand lying at the back. In the middle of it were two station wagons, six men, and Gloryanna Piper, standing by a scarecrow. Gloryanna was unbuttoning her blouse. The scarecrow’s head moved, lolling and falling forward. Solo stifled his groan of recognition and immediately edged down the length of trees.

The odds were six against one, but he had to take them. He saw the feathers strewn on the ground, smelled the heavy odor of tar, and realized what was going on. “She’s very special, you know,” Piper had said about his daughter. That, she was. And she wasn’t going to be covered with that slime!

Solo thought frantically for a way to help. He had to protect himself, because if he fell they would be lost. All he had was his pistol. They were all in range and he was a dead shot, but against six men? Five of them with rifles?

There were more men about somewhere. He had counted at least another eight in his dash to this field. Noise would bring them down on him, too. He shrugged. Gloryanna had most of the buttons undone and he had to hurry.

He scrambled on until he was even with the scene but still inside the narrow band of woods. He changed clips in his gun, substituting tranquilizing darts for lead, wanting their silence. He was as ready as he'd ever be.

Gloryanna had her shirt off entirely and appeared terribly vulnerable standing in the sun in her white cotton bra and red slacks. Solo slapped at his pocket, felt the shape of what he wanted, and pulled out three capsule-size explosives. He had to scatter the men so they couldn't turn on him in a body. He reared up and heaved one bomb with all his might for the front of the field. Before it hit the ground, he heaved another to the rear. The two bombs burst one right after the other, shooting up flame that ate the withered grass and created a frightening sight of fire and sparks.

Two men broke from the group to dash for the first fire area and one man ran to the rear. Grass fire was something they couldn't let pass. With the entire farm withered, it would flame its way to the barn and summon the fire department. So they ran to put it out while Saturn bobbed about like a crazy man on stilts.

Solo went to one knee, took careful aim, and dropped the rear man in his tracks. He swung the pistol around and felled one of the forward men in mid-stride. They plopped without a scream because of the darts and the sight panicked the skinny actor more than whizzing bullets would have. He was a frenzy of motion, tugging at the men beside him and running madly for the first station wagon. The men trailed him, craning about for something to shoot, confused by the farflung configuration of the attack.

Solo fired into the group and toppled another man, sending the others on faster. "Leave the wagon!" Solo screamed under his breath, squeezing the gun hard in hope. But they took both wagons and bounced among the stones and boulders to get away. The lone man left on his feet gave up his fire-fighting. He leaped over the burning circle and raced headlong for the next field.

With the wagons stirring dust in his face, Solo broke cover and sprinted to Illya. He grabbed up Gloryanna's shirt on the way by and thrust it at her. Illya smiled with the weakest smile Solo bad ever seen even from the sober, Slavic face.

Solo maneuvered Illya gently, freeing him and liftinf him bodily from the post. He took off the soaked jacket, then knelt and started rubbing

circulation back into Illya's numb legs. Gloryanna helped and all the while Illya mumbled information.

"Dundee is coming, Napoleon. They're shipping something out tonight. We don't have time to waste."

"We have time for this. Besides, your gleanings and mine put together tell us a lot. I checked the mansion and the other barns as I passed by and no one has been near them to even disturb the cobwebs. All of the activity has been at that one old barn. And I found the jackpot there - the lab. Now you say they're making a shipment. It all means they produced the chemical right here, so our search for the lab is ended. Half done, Illya. We only need to get our sample and we can go home."

Illya moved his legs weakly and licked his cracked lips. He struggled, rising up on shaky legs that would barely hold him. "The smoke, Napoleon. It will draw them like flies."

"There are plenty to be drawn, too. Look, Illya, can you make it under your own power? Any chance?"

Illya staggered three steps, made his back a painful ramrod and stumbled three more. "Just barely," he admitted, game to try.

"Then you go that way." Solo pointed to the side of the field. "That's toward Gloryanna's farm. Keep inside the trees. I'll lead them off to the rear. I'll have a good chance once I make the woods."

"And me?" Gloryanna asked. "I'll help Illya?"

"You'll come with me," Solo said. "We have to give Illya time to get free and clear. I'll take you home, Miss Piper." He winked at her to still her fear and she smiled. Then she threw herself against him, tall and strong, and kissed him a big smack on the lips.

"That's for saving me from becoming an old crow."

"Thank you. But I'll be horsewhipped if your father finds out." Solo put a hand on Illya's shoulder. "Move, Illya. I'll cover you as far as I can."

Illya limped away, forcing each step out of his exhausted body. Solo suddenly dashed sideways to the burning area of grass and caught up a Thrush rifle. He pounded ahead and gave it to Illya. "Wrong make, but it fires," he told the blond agent. "Chin up, Illya. You're halfway there."

Illya continued his painful progress and Solo took Gloryanna by the hand and pulled her panting and galloping to the back of the field. He turned his head every few steps to judge Illya's escape. Illya had to be out of sight before he let himself take cover. But Solo still reached his goal

before Illya did. Solo stopped, ordered Gloryanna into the trees and waited, gun ready. At last Illya limped out of sight, the trees closing over him. Solo took his own plunge for shelter and came up to the girl. There were voices calling behind him. He had cut it just right.

“Now what?” Gloryanna clasped his arm.”

“We run like hell, honey.”

The woods were cool, at least, but not as deep as Solo had hoped. He was forced to run a course in the middle. The Thrush men would have to come inside to flush him out, giving him a chance to pick them off. As he ran, dodging trucks, he switched his gun clip back to bullets.

There were crashes in the forest with them now. Crashes in front that meant men coming, and crashes behind. Solo stopped, gasping in unison with Gloryanna. Shouts came to his ears. The shouts of hunters looking for human game. He made out seven or eight separate voices, sounding off in a search pattern. He took quick shelter behind a tree trunk and drew Gloryanna close.

“Listen, from now on you’re on your own. Okay? I want you to run to the back of the woods, go outside it, and tear for home as fast as you can. Don’t stop until you get to your father.”

“But what about -?”

“I gave you an order, Gloryanna. Now, do it! I don’t want one single argument.”

“But I hear those men! There are so many.”

“Oh, and take off those red slacks. Roll them into a bundle and carry them. You can be seen for two miles in those things.”

She took off her slacks without question but showed no inclination to obey anything else. She rolled the slacks into a tight ball and tucked them under her arm.

“Move, Gloryanna!”

Her blue eyes met his with a dreadful hesitation. She was unable to leave him to fight this alone. He had to force her. “I can handle them better without you. Look, Gloryanna, if you stay you’ll undoubtedly get me killed. I have a better chance alone. So - go!” He slapped her on the rear, startling her as she realized she was half naked, and she took off with surprising speed, her tanned legs disappearing into the woods.

Solo fled against the direction he had told her to follow, drawing the men away. He had two little pheasants running through the woods on his

orders now and he had to try the broken-wing bit to lead the hunters off.

He sprinted, skittering from tree to tree, hearing the Thrush men close in. But he had a good chance and knew it. He crashed deliberately through a clump of dead underbrush, making as much noise as possible to call the hunters, and came up short with a biting pain in his ankle.

It was a fire that toppled him onto his face. He rolled over, sat up, and examined his foot. Caught in a nasty trap. An actual steel animal trap that surrounded his foot and bit into his ankle. He fought it frantically as the steps crackled closer. He should have expected something like this but he hadn't.

He couldn't open the teeth. There was a special knack to it and he didn't know that knack. All he managed to do was bite the jaws deeper into his flesh.

Then it was too late anyway. The first Thrush hunter came out of the trees, rifle pointed. He was quickly joined by more, finally making ten altogether.

"Your gun, Solo," one of them said.

Solo tossed it over. There was no chance to fight this time. Better to stall it out and see if a chance developed later. He raised his hands uselessly.

"What's the matter, Solo? Didn't they give you a course on removing animal traps at U.N.C.L.E.?"

"I suppose they don't consider us animals," Solo answered.

With a flick of his hand the Thrush in command ordered the steel jaws removed from Solo's ankle. When it was done, the man said, "On your feet, Mr. Solo. You're coming back to the barn. You have some explaining to do."

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The interior of the barn was dim and cool. Solo entered with what he called his "entourage" and was plunked down on a bale of hay. It was comfortable, so he relaxed. There was nothing else to do with fifteen Thrush musclemen at hand, their rifles pointing his direction.

A quick scan of the barn revealed no stacks of any thing to be shipped out. If they were making a shipment, then it must be already packed in the trailers.

Barber came to him and bound his wrists with rope, leaving his hands in front of him and his feet free as an act of disdain.

Look down your nose all you like, Solo thought and leaned his back against another bale. He was tired and the hay, though old, smelled incredibly good.

A half hour passed and word came that Dundee was outside. Mr. Saturn began buzzing about like a long-legged insect, setting up a folding chair and card-table, pouring out cold drinks, opening sacks of sandwiches, all for Dundee. They acted as though the man's entrance would require a call of trumpets.

Dundee stamped across the stage boards and stood hands on hips, surveying the barn. Solo recalled him clearly from the picture he had carried about New York. He was a short man, bulky and given to flabby muscles. He had red hair, blue eyes, and thousands of freckles. Only the eyes were a relief, because when they encountered Solo they glinted with intelligence. At last a Thrush who wasn't a lackey, who wasn't tottering on the edge of insanity. Solo watched him intently.

"Ah, Mr. Solo." Dundee paced over. "They told me you were here and I could hardly believe our good fortune. Especially with this group of operatives."

"They do leave a lot to be desired," Solo answered.

"From your experience you know they aren't representative of Thrush."

"Oh, really?" Solo opened his eyes in mock surprise. "I was convinced you had sunk to this level since you let them be in charge of Operation Breadbasket."

"In charge?" Dundee laughed. "You know better. These men actually offend me."

"You all offend me."

Dundee stiffened, then relaxed himself. But he couldn't hide the redness that swelled over his face. "I learned long ago not to let a prisoner raise my temper. After all, a prisoner has no dignity. He isn't worthy of contempt."

Solo didn't speak. He simply leaned back, settling himself more comfortably on the hay.

Dundee eyed him up and down. "I hear you even stooped to personally dispense with Abel Adams. A harmless little idiot like that - wasn't it a waste of your time?"

"It was time badly spent, anyway," Solo said with a shiver.

"Saturn!" Dundee shouted suddenly, and the thin man came buzzing up. "You let Solo sit here with this much freedom? You'll lose him."

“Not at all. Mr. Solo isn’t going anywhere in the face of our guards. I had grand things planned for him but you destroyed all of that. You and Central.”

Dundee scoffed. “You couldn’t have any business with Solo. You probably don’t even realize what he is or why we want him.”

Dundee’s habit of ridiculing his underlings had set Adams off, and Solo now hoped it didn’t trigger a like effect in Saturn.

“I caught him,” Saturn protested.

“And you’ll be rewarded. But he is for Thrush Central. They’ve been waiting for him with itching palms for years.”

Solo sighed to himself, relieved. The interrogation would come much later, then, and at the hands of professionals. Probably unpleasant to the ultimate degree, but still in the future.

“What do you think of Operation Breadbasket, Solo?” Dundee asked him.

“It’s completely vicious and thoroughly Thrush. Hit the world where it hurts the most.”

“Yes. The corn, the wheat, rice - every grain crop, every vegetable crop, and thus every bit of livestock because they can’t live without the grasses. Ingenious!” Dundee showed him the grin Solo had seen so often on Thrush faces. “Too bad you’re out of it and won’t be around to see it reach its climax.”

“Too bad, is right,” Solo countered. “I’ve always enjoyed watching starving children clutch their bellies.”

“The bleeding hearts of U.N.C.L.E.,” Dundee snorted. “You people can never see the glory of the result, only the tiny bad points of the process.”

“You take the low road and I’ll take the high,” Solo said. “What I’d like to know is why you were so open with this project. No isolated lab, no mountain hide-out. How did you think you could get away with destroying farmland in Michigan?”

“Boldness, Mr. Solo! Thrush has taken on a new boldness. And it has worked. Besides which, time is short. We had no time to set up an artificial farm. Now is the time to strike! Right in the middle of the growing season.”

“Is this all your brainchild, Dundee?”

“No - I wish I could claim it. Unfortunately, the man who conceived it is dead. Central has taken it over completely.”

Saturn was still hovering, eager to collect his share of the glory. “When you radio Thrush Central, Dundee, I demand to be at your side. You must give me credit for a change. I arranged for Solo’s capture, and for the other one.”

Dundee spun right around to face Saturn. “What other one?”

“The little blond one.”

“And where is he?”

“Well - he escaped. Solo did it. I had him properly finished, but Solo let him loose.”

Dundee was red-faced and fuming. He reached into his pocket and produced two photographs, holding up the second for Saturn to view. “Blond? Small? Is this the man?”

Saturn looked and nodded.

“You blasted idiot! That is Illya Kuryakin! As much use to us as Solo, himself. You let him go?”

“I was only told to watch for Solo,” Saturn explained. “I was only shown Solo’s picture and told to watch for him. I presumed I was supposed to kill him.”

“Then you should have done a little more inquiring.” Dundee sighed. “Very well. It’s done. But put two more guards on Solo because with Kuryakin at large we can’t be sure we’re out of danger.”

The two extra guards moved in immediately. Dundee shook his head in exasperation, picked up a cold drink, gulped it down, and slammed the glass on the table. “I’m going to radio Central right now,” he said. “Come along, Saturn. You can explain to them how you let Kuryakin slip through your fingers.”

Saturn trailed Dundee, his bouncing walk subdued to a reluctant shuffle. Solo smiled. Illya was outside free somewhere, and for himself, he was happy with the thought.

The two men went out of the barn and the place became quiet. Solo’s personal guards were alert but the rest of the men lounged about drinking pop and saying little. Word came that the fire in the field had been put out and things were quiet again.

A sudden disturbance ruptured the deceptive peace. Voices shouted, a girl screamed back, and two men entered the barn dragging Gloryanna, clad in her red slacks, between them. She fought every step of the way, making them half carry her along, twisting her arm brutally. When she neared the

place where the mimeograph machine stood she jerked free and ran two steps. The biggest man shoved her down and as she fell she slammed into the ink bottles, tumbling them about the floor. One labeled RED crashed and broke, splashing a yellow liquid over her left forearm.

Solo sat up. Yellow liquid. The label had said Red Ink. The men grabbed her immediately and dragged her to Solo, kicking and shouting half-formed curses. Solo intervened before she forced them to injure her. “Take it easy, Gloryanna. Walk, and it won’t be so hard on you.”

She looked up sharply at his voice and rushed for him, pulling the men with her. She stood in front of him, saw the ropes on his wrists, and her eyes watered up, her mouth twisting.

“Uh-uh,” Solo said gently. “None of that. Just pick up that rag from the floor, wipe that stuff off your arm, and sit down.”

“My arm?” She stared at the place where the yellow liquid was drying. “What is it?”

“I don’t know, but wipe it off while you can.” He felt a sense of urgency that she should get the liquid off her skin. He had no basis for it except the mislabeled bottle.

She grabbed the rag and dabbed at her arm, then rubbed, getting it off just before the biggest man pushed her again, sending her down on the hay beside Solo. No one bothered to restrain her. They simply made gestures with their rifles which she understood.

She wriggled close to Solo, whispering, “I was hoping you’d gotten away. They had a hard time catching me, but they did it.”

“And Illya?” He didn’t whisper. Whispers drew more attention than a full voice kept low.

“I think he made it. I haven’t seen anything of him.”

“Then sit still, do what they say, and have hope.” Solo winked at her.

“For Illya to come?” She shook her head. “He could hardly walk by himself.”

“Never give up where Illya’s concerned. That’s one thing I’ve learned over the years. He has the courage of a Russian wolf.”

She patted his ropes with her hand. “So have you. I’m sorry I let myself be caught after you risked your life to save me. But - what is this all about? Why are they all gathered here?”

“They’re shipping everything to Thrush Central tonight. I’m part of the shipment.”

“What do they want with you at Thrush Central?” She said the words stiffly, not used to them yet.

“They want to ask me some questions.”

“Questions you can answer?”

“No,” he said pointedly.

“That’s what I thought. Then, you can’t -” She broke off suddenly and clasped her arm where the yellow liquid had been. She gasped and doubled over.

Solo lifted her straight as best he could with his hands tied, his eyes questioning.

“It hurts!” she cried. “I’ve never felt anything hurt so much. *Napoleon! I hurt!*” Her forehead was beaded with sweat and her eyes glazed over. She doubled up again.

Solo shouted at the big man who had brought her in. “What was in the bottle she spilled on her arm?”

The man didn’t bother to answer. Solo tried again. “Barber! What was in that ink bottle?”

“What would you expect, Solo? The Breadbasket chemical.”

“And what will it do to her? Does it affect people?”

“Of course it does. It’s dangerous stuff when it’s liquid. We have to wear special suits to handle it in liquid form.” Barber shuffled close. “All over her arm, huh? Well, I’ll tell you what to expect, Piper. Your arm will hurt like you’ve never been hurt before, and then it will wrinkle up and wither and turn brown and the flesh will fall off to the bone. In a month’s time you’ll be deader than -”

Solo cut him off with his own shock, “You’ve actually tested it on a human being?”

“By accident only,” Barber growled.

“And the counter-chemical, Barber! Will that cure her?”

“Probably,” Barber said. “If she could use it.”

“There are no ‘ifs’, Barber. Get some of it and rub her arm with it,” Solo ordered.

Barber laughed. “Look who’s in command of Thrush!” Gloryanna was writhing on the bales of hay, gasps and moans escaping her. She acted wild enough to tear her arm off to be rid of the pain.

“Get her the antidote!” Solo commanded. “You haven’t any orders to kill her!”

“Take it easy, Solo,” Dundee cut in. “You’re getting too excited.”

Solo took the final chance. He stood up, ignoring the guns. “If you have the antidote, get it for this girl, Dundee!”

Dundee put his hands on his hips again, his favorite posture. “Just what is your bargaining point, Solo?”

“Myself!” Solo hissed, his black eyes sparking. “Be cause if you don’t help her I’m going to throw myself at you and you’ll have to kill me on the spot. You’ll only have a corpse to deliver to Thrush Central.”

Dundee rocked back on his heels, thinking fast.

Saturn peeped over his shoulder. “It’s a grandstand play. An empty threat.”

“No,” Dundee said. “Solo will do it. I’ve heard about him.”

“All we need to do is hit him on the head and he can’t throw himself at anybody.”

Dundee hesitated. “But why let the girl die. A pretty girl like that. We may need her later to help Solo co operate.” He smiled down at Gloryanna, who was writhing in agony. “Get the stuff, Barber. Fix her up. I like blondes.”

Solo watched as Barber took up a bottle labeled BLACR INK and brought it back. Barber poured it on Gloryanna’s arm, washing it thoroughly. Solo knew now where the prizes were kept in this game of Operation Breadbasket. In ink bottles.

Dundee was in command again. “Move off, Solo. Stand clear of Barber if you want her treated.”

Solo obeyed, resuming his role of prisoner.

Barber finished. “That will do it. Had it happen to me once. Thought I was going to die from the pain, but it will stop hurting right away and it won’t wrinkle, even. I got it in time.”

Gloryanna sat up, amazed, her eyes big and already surrounded with dark circles from the intense pain. She gasped out a thank you to Barber and another to Solo.

With the crisis passed, Dundee swung into action. “I’ve got new orders from Central. Fasten Solo down. He makes me nervous on his feet.” He pivoted, eyeing the barn, floor to ceiling. Fling a rope over the rafter there and dangle our U.N.C.L.E. friend from it. First, strip off his shirt.”

“What’s up?” Barber asked, motioning his men to obey Dundee.

“We’re all due for a bonus - if we can deliver. Central is overjoyed at having Solo. They’re sending a helicopter for him. But they don’t want us to take chances with him. Since we have to wait for the helicopter we’re to get what we can from him here, and on the way in, just in case. They’ll take over on delivery.”

“They don’t trust us very much,” Barber complained.

Solo said, “No Thrush ever trusts another Thrush, don’t you know that?” He stood between two big men while four guns were aimed at his stomach. His jacket was gone and his shirt was being pulled off his anus. It followed the jacket to the floor. Hands free or not, he had no chance to fight out of the situation. His arms were grabbed hard, rope knotted about each wrist and attached to the rope that hung from the ceiling. He was stretched upward, and on Dundee’s orders raised three inches off the floor. But he still had his feet free and that comforted him,

“Get something heavy over here and fasten his ankles down,” Dundee ordered, careful, always careful. “We’ll all get our teeth kicked out otherwise.”

“No!” came out of Solo involuntarily. He swallowed hard, humiliated, but sweat broke out on his forehead as he felt his legs being immobilized. He was going to hang here completely helpless. A half-man with no use of his limbs.

Dundee noticed the sweat. “Scared already, Solo? Good boy.”

Solo battled the feeling of panic that came in a wave from his stomach and made him want to flail about. It was unreal panic. He had to remember that. It was left over from Adams.

“He’s ready, Dundee,” Barber said, “but what are we going to use on him? We don’t have any drugs and probably Central won’t want him too bloody.”

“Use your head as though you had one,” Dundee said. “You saw that little demonstration with the blonde, didn’t you? That hurt, didn’t it? We’ve got plenty of the demonstration chemical, so we can spare a bottle or two on Solo.”

Gloryanna leaped to her feet and ran across the barn. She took a defiant stand in front of Solo as though to protect him. A big Thrush moved in and butted her to the floor with his gun. She sprawled, but scrambled back. “You’re not going to touch him. I don’t know what kind of men you are, but you’re not going to touch him!”

A rifle was aimed at her head and Solo intervened again. “Go back to your place, Gloryanna, and stay there.”

“No!” She fought him now, her eyes blazing hellishly. “I’m not going to sit by and watch this happen. I know how it feels!”

“You’re going to sit by, all right,” Solo told her. “But you’re not going to watch. Turn your back and be quiet. This isn’t the business of a girl who grows daffodils.”

She was pushed out of position roughly and she submitted, making it clear she was surrendering to Solo and not the hoodlums.

Solo kept his eyes and his mind on her as she returned to the hay bales, needing something to divert himself from the panic that threatened him. The panic itself might break him and he couldn’t allow that to happen.

He hung there and deliberately tested his bonds, forcing himself to feel to his marrow that he was helpless, to acknowledge it, fighting the panic waves down as they rose. It was a test of Solo against Solo, as Adams had promised it would be, and he’d either win or break into pieces.

He warred against himself, the helplessness, the hanging suspended - and he came out whole. He hoped he came out whole. He wouldn’t be sure until the questions were asked and he refused them.

While he waited, Galaxy swayed up to him. He’d wondered where she was. She smiled up into his face and ran one finger along his chest, outlining the muscles. “Why did you have to get yourself caught?” she whispered. “Poor Napoleon. Strong, honest, and stupid. Now I suppose you’ll let them kill you before you give up any secrets.”

“Rules are rules,” he told her.

“That’s just the point, love. Thrush doesn’t have such foolish rules. You’re on the wrong side.”

He ignored that remark, asking pointedly, “Are you Dundee’s property? Is that why you’re here?”

She nodded, her long black hair brushing her shoulders. “And we won’t mention that you trespassed this afternoon, will we?”

“It’s no business of mine. But you should know, Galaxy, that you’re up for the Thrush form of urban renewal. Down you come and a younger blonde rises in your place.”

He enjoyed the sharpness that came into her face and her swing to stare at Gloryanna, huddled with her back to them on the hay.

“Planning something between you?” Dundee asked. His hand came out automatically to stroke Galaxy’s hair and she glared at Solo in triumph. “You’ll crush our friend Saturn if you escape, Solo. I’ve promised him the chance to do the honors for you. I have no stomach for it, myself.”

Saturn said, reassuming his role of actor, “I’m going to play the villain of villains! Nothing written. All improvised!” He brandished a bottle marked RED INK, eager to use it.

“Just drips and drops, mind you, Saturn,” Dundee warned him.

“I know! I know! Now, what questions am I supposed to ask him?”

Dundee didn’t hesitate. “Start with the secret entrance to U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters in New York - Waverly’s entrance.”

Solo smiled to himself. That was the best possible question since it was the one he couldn’t answer. They could hammer at him for days and he couldn’t tell them because he didn’t know.

“Fine.” Saturn took his place before Solo, still taller than the young agent even though Solo was suspended three inches from the floor. He opened the bottle, set it down, drew on some plastic gloves, and picked the liquid up again. “Mr. Solo,” he said grandly, you will please tell me the location of the secret entrance to your head quarters in New York.” Then he whispered, “And if you dare tell without giving me the chance to reinstate my self in front of Dundee, I’ll personally strangle you where you hang.”

“I wouldn’t dream of ruining your opportunity,” Solo said, keeping his eyes away from the bottle.

Saturn pushed a glass straw into the neck of the bottle to let liquid fill it, then clapped a finger over the end and drew the straw out, gleaming with yellow. His hand came up and he faltered, not sure where to begin. “The chest area, I think,” he muttered.

He stretched his thin arm out, held the straw over Solo’s shoulder and let the liquid flow. It was chilly running down from his shoulder onto his chest and Solo shivered. Saturn caught the excess by forming a cup with his gloved hand on Solo’s stomach.

It was done and nothing happened. Saturn looked to Dundee impatiently.

“You have to give it time to take effect, idiot,” Dundee said. “A few minutes.”

“It’s ruined, then,” Saturn cried. “You can’t do this properly without instantaneous results.”

“You’ll get results - and more,” Dundee promised. “Once the pain starts for him, it doesn’t ever quit, and you can just add to it at will - until he gives in.”

Solo wasn’t shivering anymore. He was waiting. Soon the same pain that had sent Gloryanna writhing on the floor would begin for him, but it was clear in his mind that he could stand up to it. The emotional battle he’d been fighting since Adams had been engaged and won. He let relief and pride dominate him now because he had earned it. Saturn and his little glass tube of fire could go hang.

Chapter 14

“If Solo Comes, Can Kuryakin Be Far Behind?”

ILLYA SNEAKED UP the barn hill, glad for the late afternoon clouds that had gathered blackly in the southwest to dim the sun. It would be an early, unreal dark. He traveled cautiously. The Thrush men must be about somewhere, though he had seen no evidence of them. Just the trailers and the cars parked by the barn.

He edged up to the door and peered inside. The scene was dim and crowded. There were twelve men scattered about and too many rifles for happy counting. He spotted Gloryanna sitting on a bale of hay, her back to the rest. As Mr. Saturn stepped aside, he saw Napoleon strung up like a side of beef. They were going to do something to him, that was certain, but there was no indication of what. Everyone seemed innocent enough.

Saturn held a bottle and a glass straw, but no one else carried tools associated with interrogation. Still, just Napoleon’s stance was enough to tell the story.

Illya crouched back against the wall. He had to do something fast. In his present state of mind Napoleon might break, and Illya was sure that no matter how inconsequential the information given, Solo would never forgive himself.

Illya reared up to survey the inside of the barn once more, looking for possibilities. At the far end he saw a hatchet. That could help. There were rolls of barbed wire and they might do. What else? And how to get the men out? He couldn’t attack twelve men at once with the single Thrush rifle Solo had given him.

He ran bent over away from the barn, going in among the cars, letting thoughts run rampant to bring up a workable plan. First order - disperse the men. Even at his best he couldn’t beat all of them together, and he had no trouble remembering that he wasn’t at his best. Every time he moved, his body registered aches and pains. He hid behind a station wagon, dusty and spotted from some recent rain, and his gaze came to rest on a trailer hitch.

He sprang up and went to the hitch, unfastening it as quickly as he could. He made the rounds of all the trailers, detaching them from the cars, glad they weren't parked in a line or neat rows, but were scattered about. With one eye on the open barn door he worked desperately until they were all unfastened. Then he took the next step, holding his breath as he hoped for Thrush overconfidence to play to his advantage as it had so often.

He peeked into a car, checking the ignition, and almost let out a yelp of delight. The key was there in the ignition and waiting to be turned.

'Tm coming, Napoleon," Illya muttered. He began his ace play.

All of the cars were perched on the incline that led to the barn hill, and headed in various directions. Illya slunk about among them, looking for what he needed. When he found it, it was a messy pile of old garden stakes, long enough and sturdy enough for his purpose. He carried them to the car, flicked the key to start the motor, then jammed one of the stakes down on the accelerator as he wedged the other end of it up under the dash panel. The motor whirred to life. He put the car in gear, released the handbrake, gave the wheel a turn, and let it go. It moved fast, driving itself forward in an uncontrolled motion that would eventually slam it against a trailer.

Illya scrambled to another car, turning on the head lights for added effect and tying the wheel with some rope he found so the car would run in a big circle. He broke the stake shorter this time to give a speed of about ten miles an hour instead of the mad dash of the first.

He saw that car off, and then another.

Running a panting race, he got them all going, aware of shouts from the barn but ignoring them until he had all the cars mobile. He tooted the last two horns to add to the confusion, sending up a violent blast of noise.

He waited for only a moment to survey the chaos he'd made, the cars roaring under their jammed accelerator power, some in forward, some in reverse. It wouldn't give him much time, but some. He sprinted for the end of the barn and the door and the hatchet he knew were there, dodging inside the wild automobile corral he had created. Thrush men poured out of the barn yelling and shouting but afraid to go among the cars to stop them.

He gained the ground floor door, scaled the ladder to the main floor, and took his bearings. Napoleon was facing him, eager-eyed at the bedlam. Illya's hand touched the hatchet and he raised it up. He'd have one shot only. Saturn and Dundee were sticking close to Napoleon but only one other

guard remained. His shot had to go to the rope that suspended his friend, and cut that rope.

Mustering all the years of training he'd put himself through, he raised his arm and heaved the hatchet. It whizzed through the air in its arc and he hardly dared watch its flight. It hit - a direct hit! The rope snapped and Napoleon fell to the floor with a hard thump.

Solo was startled by the fall, but not completely. He'd expected some kind of manna from heaven as soon as the commotion began outside. His feet hit the floor and he went slamming onto his back. He couldn't roll be cause his feet were tied, but as he hit he struggled up and worked to unbind his ankles. The pain on his chest was infuriating, making his hands tremble, and Dundee pulled at him to hinder his escape.

Then Dundee wasn't pulling anymore. He had fallen over, a hole in his chest, a look of disgust on his face, dead. Solo saw the fleeting shape of Illya in the shadows, a Thrush rifle in his hands.

Solo was free. He went into a fighting crouch, jabbed his fist deep into Saturn's middle, and the man crumpled like a puppet; he hardly made a sound going down.

Leaving the bewildered guard to Illya, Solo raced to pick up some ink bottles. He got two Blacks and one Red and rushed to Gloryanna, burying them safely under the hay bales so they couldn't break. He went back, jerked up another Black and opened it, pouring the liquid on his shoulder and chest where the fire burned. It had seemed an unquenchable fire but it was quickly and astoundingly out.

The Thrush guard fell at a burst from Illya's gun. Illya was soon beside Solo. Solo panted, "Ink bottles. Black is the counter chemical, Red is the destroyer. Remember!"

He snatched up the dead guard's gun and together he and Illya crossed the stage and took up places beside the big doors. Galaxy had crumpled in a heap beside Gloryanna, seeking protection anyplace she could find it.

Solo and Illya set up a deadly fire, shooting into the men who were jockeying the cars to a halt. They called out numbers to each other. "One down - two - three - four down!"

"What did you create out there?" Solo yelled to Illya.

'Pandemonium," came the answer.

Solo gloried in the sight. Three cars were still on the go, headlights bouncing, but they wouldn't be rolling much longer because their paths

would soon be crossed by a parked trailer. Too many Thrush figures were on their feet, and potshooting from the barn wasn't going to clear them out.

"Care for a closer range?" Solo yelled again.

"Lead the way!"

Solo squeezed off some rounds to force the Thrush men to duck and hurled himself away from the door, down the barn hill slope, dashing for a stalled car. He came up hard beside it and sprayed his bullets about like a madman as Thrush heads popped up to take aim. Illya scrambled into the shelter of a trailer and pumped off measured shots.

This was still getting him nowhere, Solo realized. He picked up another fallen Thrush gun, checked for ammunition and found plenty. He sprinted out of hiding, running to intersect the last mobile car. He caught it on the driver's side and leaped onto it, clinging like an Indian on the side of a horse, bouncing with it, clutching the steering wheel with the two fingers of his right hand that also held the rifle. He managed to keep from colliding with a trailer, gave the wheel a sharp turn, then dropped to the ground and yanked the door open, struggling into the driver's seat.

He kicked Illya's jammed stake away so he'd have control of the car and drove it into the Thrush gunfire. The windshield shattered even as he ducked. He was up again, the rifle pointing through the broken glass. Letting go of the wheel, he gunned the motor and sped forward, blasting at Thrush figures all the way. Another man fell. Illya was working steadily on a big one.

It was all madness. Solo's car careened about barely guided, spitting fire and dust and bullets like a maddened dragon. Illya carefully picked off any Thrush who couldn't stand the suspense and tried to run.

In short minutes the Thrush men gave up in horror, taking to their heels in a flight for the road. Solo rammed the car after them, setting its course to collide with a tree far down the field. He opened the door, stamped once more on the accelerator, and rolled from the car. He hit the ground and came to his feet, rifle ready.

There was no more need to fire. The few remaining Thrush men were possessed of demons, the car roaring behind them. They would run until they reached town.

Solo returned to Illya. They laughed together as they went to the barn. Gloryanna met them standing up but Galaxy stayed where she was on the hay bales, and her eyes when they touched Solo's were dark, deep, and

helplessly inviting. Her face was suddenly that of a misguided girl instead of the confident woman she was.

“Keep an eye on that one,” Solo told Illya. “She does the fastest swivel in town.”

Galaxy stopped the bit she had started, giving up the hope of luring them into believing she was a dupe.

Gloryanna tried to hug both Solo and Illya at once. Then she concentrated on Illya. “How did you ever manage it? A few hours ago you were barely walking and now you’ve saved us all.”

“Your father,” Illya explained. “I got to your house and he gave me a warm bath, some liniment - cow brand, I think, from the sting of it - and a couple of drinks. He made me almost as good as new.”

“Gloryanna’s father?” Solo was surprised. “He actually let you in the house?” He remembered only too well how the man had thrown him off the farm.

Illya smiled slyly. “He said he liked my face. And he had a lot of well chosen words for you.”

“Thanks,” Solo said with a grin. “Next time I meet him I’ll impersonate a ragamuffin and maybe he’ll let Gloryanna see us off with our ink bottles.”

Solo reached under the hay and retrieved his three prizes. “Our monthly salary, Illya. Again we manage to return with our shields and not on them.”

Illya glanced about. “We’ll need help to clean up this barn. And you might dress, Napoleon. Such a display of manly charm is misleading to a sweet girl like Gloryanna.”

Gloryanna met Illya’s eyes steadily, proving that there wasn’t a blush in her. “Why did you have to spoil my whole day? I was enjoying the view. But - let’s do go home, all right? Because pretty soon the reaction will set in and I’ll cry like a baby. I refuse to shed a tear in front of this moon woman.”

She took Galaxy roughly in tow and Solo waited to see what Galaxy would do. Galaxy surrendered. Gloryanna’s strength was obvious and the dancer wouldn’t endanger one soft contour by trying to fight free.

Solo and Illya pivoted together and went to collect Mr. Saturn. “Alley-oop,” Solo told the half-conscious man. “You have a command performance coming up, Saturn. United Network Command.”

Illya scowled humorlessly at the joke and helped heave the skinny prisoner to his feet where he held him while Solo used Dundee’s own

Thrush radio to call Chicago for an intercept on the helicopter scheduled to rendezvous at the barn.